

The New York Review of Science Fiction

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Debbie Notkin Forbidden Sex and Uncontrollable Obsession: Sex in the Writings of Norman Spinrad

Most science fiction writers don't really try to examine gender and sexuality seriously. The ones who do (especially the men who do) really deserve credit for the attempt. In contemporary science fiction, I know no male writer who puts more apparent thought and energy into these topics than Norman Spinrad, and I'd like to be able to appreciate his efforts. When his fiction steers clear of these loaded topics I find him talented, thought-provoking and skillful. The author of *Bug Jack Barron*, *The Iron Dream*, and *Carcinoma Angels* (as well as the fine mainstream novel *The Mind Game*) has certainly made an important contribution to contemporary literature. Lest anyone think I'm only partial to early Spinrad, let me steer you towards the extraordinary humorous novella "World War Last," which is simultaneously knee-slappingly funny and bitingly satiric. However, none of these works have sex and gender relations at their center. On these topics, laudable though his intentions may be, he seems too mired in certain preconceptions to permit serious examination.

The major preconception hampering Spinrad's fictional exploration of sexuality is the constant, unchallenged assumption that sexual drives are of overwhelming, controlling importance, and that any barrier to sexual satisfaction is automatically an obstacle of such import that it overrides all other motivations. This contention is clearly expressed by narrator Genro Kane Gupta in *The Void Captain's Tale* (Timescape, 1983):

The ancient folkwisdom that an erect phallus knows no morality is meant as an ironic jocularly, but it contains an approximation of the truth; when your libidinal energy is captured by a sexual engram, the logic of further action is that not of your will but of the engram itself until that energy is discharged.

Certainly, we have all known people for whom this is true, but in Spinrad's relevant fictions, it seems to be true for all of the men all of the time and most of the women most of the time. Characters as diverse as Paco Monaco in *Little Heroes* and Roger Falkenstein in *A World Between* are driven by their "sexual engrams" to behavior demonstrably counter to their stated goals. Furthermore, Spinrad frequently seems to say that such obsessive disregard of all other motivations is either laudable or so unavoidable that value judgments are irrelevant.

Viewing sexual desire either as an appropriate obsessive motivation or as something completely beyond one's control is a common justification for many clichés of sexual wish-fulfillment fantasy. In *A World Between* (Pocket Books, 1979), Spinrad makes a serious attempt to construct a balanced analysis of a sociopolitical war between the sexes using carefully constructed fictional de-

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L. Ron Hubbard, and Terry Bisson

Ursula K. Le Guin Introduction to the Women's Press edition of *The Language of the Night*

The Language of the Night was first published in the United States in 1979. When the idea of a collection of my talks and essays was first proposed, I begged off from the job of getting the stuff sorted out and edited, as I wanted to get on with my fiction. Susan Wood, whom I had known when we visited Australia, a generous, brilliant woman and a scholar at the beginning of a notable career, undertook the task. She found directions in the tangle and made a whole of all the parts. The book's shape is hers. Her early death darkened it for me. I have had little joy of it, since I can't share it with her.

I don't know what she'd think of the revisions I did for this new edition; I hope she'd like them.

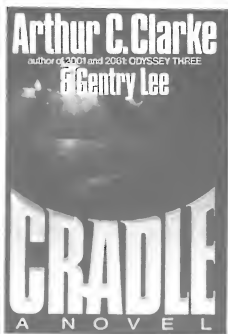
In general, I feel that revising published work is taboo. You took the risk then, you can't play safe now. . . . And also, what about the readers of the first version — do they have to trot loyally out and buy the recension, or else feel that they've been cheated of something? It seems most unfair to them. All the same, I have in this case broken my taboo. The changes I wanted to make were not aesthetic, artistic ones, but had a moral and intellectual urgency to me. I can excuse them partly to myself by saying that since this is the only British appearance of the book, it has no Old English Readers to be unfair to.

There are a few changes in the text, mostly omissions of a word or sentence or corrections of my own or the typesetter's errors. The principal revision involves the so-called "generic pronoun" *be*. It has been changed, following context, euphony, or whim, to *they*, *she*, *one*, *I*, *you*, or *we*. This is a political change, of course (just as

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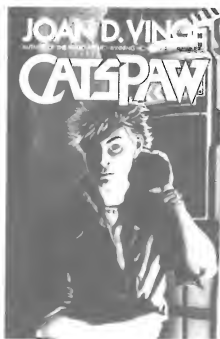
THE WORLD ACCORDING TO

ARTHUR C. CLARKE, JOAN D. VINGE AND GREG BEAR



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the substitution of *he* for *they* as the "correct" written form of the singular generic pronoun — see the OED — was a political act. Having resistingly, reluctantly, but finally admitted that *he* means *he*, no more, no less, I can't let it stand in these essays, because it is a mistake. When I wrote in the early seventies about "the artist who works from the center of his own being," I did not intend to refer to male artists only, still less to imply that artists are naturally male; but that is what the words say and imply. The existence of women artists is not (in the grammarians' cute phrase) "embraced" by the male pronoun: it is (in the non-cute Argentinian usage) "disappeared" by it. I was in fact disappearing myself in my own writing — just like a woman. Well, no more of that.

In making these pronoun changes, especially if I was replacing *he* with *I*, *we*, or *you*, I found that they often led me to take what I said in a more engaged way, to be wary of glibness, to be certain that I or we or you might really do or think what "he," that elusive hypocrite, so could easily be said to do or to think, since "he" wasn't really there at all. . . .

The essay that confronts the whole matter directly is the one about my novel *The Left Hand of Darkness*, called "Is Gender Necessary?" This 1976 piece has been quoted from a good deal, usually to my intense embarrassment. I came within a few years to disagree completely with some of the things I said in it, but there they were in print, and all I could do was write in deserved misery as the feminists told me off and the masculinists patted my head. Clearly it would have been unethical to rewrite the 1976 text, to "disappear" it; so it appears complete here, with 1988 remarks and annotations. Anybody who quotes from it henceforth and omits the updating is deliberately misquoting me. [1]

Elsewhere in preparing the text for this edition I have added notes at the foot of the page, commenting, enlarging, updating, grumbling, clarifying, etc.

The response to the American editions of the book has come largely from people interested in the process of writing because they

[1] The augmented version, "Is Gender Necessary? Redux," will appear in the US in *Dancing at the Edge of the World*, a collection of essays by Ursula K. Le Guin forthcoming from Grove Press in January 1989. [—eds.]

write, or teach writing, or want to know how artists' minds work. And it has always had readers among people capable of taking science fiction seriously as an interesting variety of modern fiction.

I feel a bit sad when I read the last paragraphs of the book, the end of a talk I gave to the World Science Fiction Convention in Melbourne in 1975. At that time I thought there was a real chance that the genrefication/devaluation of science fiction by critics and academics and its self-ghettoisation by publishers and writers was giving way to a general recognition of science fiction as literature, with all the privileges and obligations thereto pertaining. I was perhaps more hopeful than wise. In the thirteen years since, there have been some very fine works of English literature published as science fiction; several gallant risk-takers, including Lessing and Atwood, have published and identified new novels as science fiction; the study and teaching of the field in American schools and universities has increased its scope and refined its methods. But none of this has given science fiction the freedom of the city. The Canoners of Literature still refuse to admit that genrefication is a political tactic and that the type of fiction they distinguish as "serious," "mainstream," "literary," etc., is itself a genre without inherent superiority to any other. Reviews of science fiction in most journals are still mostly segregated into a batch or corner of "Sci Fi," treated as pop lit. And within the science fiction community of conventions, journals, reviews, and conferences, while the cross-over novelists have been mostly ignored — apparently out of sheer xenophobia — the most successful writers have mostly been content to work within the safe parameters of the totally predictable, taking no risks and going nowhere we haven't all been before. That the reactionary mood of the Reagan-Thatcher years should be reflected in science fiction isn't surprising — after all, where did SDI, "Star Wars," come from? But it is, to me, depressing.

Competition for enormous advances, the best-seller mentality, a kind of degraded professionalism, the reduction of book to product, the lack of interest in the quality of the product, all this has, I think, weakened the sense of community that did exist among science fiction writers and editors and readers, and also has led to a drastic decrease of self-respect. This has been brought home to me recently by repeated assertions concerning me — that I have repudiated

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Kathryn Cramer, Features Editor; Samuel R. Delany, Contributing Editor; David G. Hartwell, Reviews Editor; Patrick Nielsen Hayden, Designer and Sypox; Teresa Nielsen Hayden, Managing Editor; Susan Palwick, Fantasy Editor. Staff: Greg Cox, Claire Wolf Landau, Debbie Notkin.

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science fiction and have joined "the Eastern Literary Establishment," motivated by lust for money and respectability. It makes me cross. I have enough money, and am more respectable than I ever intended, and wouldn't join the bunch of old white men who think they're the Literary Establishment if they gave me a crown in heaven. I've always written and published work both in science fiction and out of it, but nobody who knew anything about science fiction used to yap at me for doing so — only snobs did, trying to put me down because I wouldn't play snob with them. These accusations of "apostasy" must arise from an unadmitted, self-abasing assumption that science fiction is a dead end that anybody with high aims would want to get out of. And from misogyny.

Lessing and Atwood, See and Geary and others who have crossed over to and from or settled down in science fiction recently don't just "happen to be" women. Nor do I, who have come into and out of science fiction and fantasy freely all my writing life, "happen

Fire on the Mountain by Terry Bisson

New York: Arbor House/William Morrow, 1988; \$16.95 hardcover; 167 pp.

Reviewed by John M. Ford

In 1859, John Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry leads not to disaster for Brown but the ignition of an abolitionist guerrilla war, which leads to a nationwide slave revolt. Other revolutionary movements the world over—the Italian Garibaldi, Toussaint L'Ouverture in Haiti—lend support, and the American South becomes an independent Black nation; from this beginning, socialist revolution sweeps the globe, so that a hundred years later the world is united and at peace, with miraculous technology in place, orbital habitats functioning, a Mars landing imminent.

This is the premise of *Fire on the Mountain*, and a splendid one it is. The dawn of the revolution is narrated through the memoirs of a young Appalachian slave called Abraham, who will eventually join Brown's army, become a physician and a great revolutionary figure; his memoirs are acutely observed, human and moving.

Now, the trick in reviewing alternate history is to analyze the book the author intended to write, his success or failure at achieving those intentions, not some hypothetical other novel. I think that Bisson's intention was to write not a mechanical pinball history or a fantasy war game of Black National Liberation, but an examination of how great changes begin with the individual acceptance of the possibility of change, and then the willingness to make the changes happen. Assuming that, he succeeded very well with the Dr. Abraham material.

That's the good news.

Bisson has also chosen to give us a parallel plot, set a hundred years after the war begins, involving Dr. Abraham's great-granddaughter Yasmin, who has come to Harper's Ferry to donate the Doctor's papers to a museum. Yasmin's husband was lost on the first Mars mission, and she still has not come to terms with the loss; she also doesn't know how to relate to her daughter Harriet.

And that's where the bad news starts. Because Yasmin's world, for all its pretty sf details (superconducting airships, apparently with antigravity drives, hydrogen-fueled cars, synthetic life forms, heroic space missions) isn't a real place: it's a set of two-dimensional postulates that the author can't be bothered to develop from, or even consult, to his original premise.

Not being more than minor deities, authors are permitted a certain number of unquestioned assumptions in alternate-world fiction. But this is fiction, and once the assumptions are in place, architectural construction is required. Yet every major event in this book takes place by fiat. Brown's guerrilla war succeeds because...well, because it does. Bisson's viewpoint character isn't present at any of the early battles, which Brown and Harriet Tubman win with the sort of perfect facility one expects of the Dorsai. (Abraham does not describe the important battle at which he is present.)

Very well; Bisson is not telling a war story, he has chosen to show

to be" a woman. Our refusal to accept rules we didn't make and boundaries that make no sense to us is a direct expression of our being women writers in the eighth decade of the twentieth century. We aren't "writing like men" any more and therefore are by now used to the fact that a good many men and male-supremacist women do not, will not understand what we're doing. Some do; some will. Others will remain shrill — no, sorry, bass, of course — in their denunciation of our refusal to play games we have no interest in winning by rules we never agreed to. One such game is the Old Boys Club, including the SF Old Boys Club. That another is the Literature Game, and that its rules include the Canons of What Constitutes Literature (no science fiction, no fantasy, and no women authors except two or three dead virgins) — this doesn't seem to occur to these vigilantes. They're too busy shooting at their own feet. It's too bad. Their defensiveness can only delay the recognition of science fiction as one of the central fictional modes of our century. ▶

us only the blood and death and confusion that follow the clash. Maybe battle really is not comprehensible. But, y'know, some of those racist of Southern officers were pretty good guerrilla fighters themselves; Robert E. Lee might have fallen for the sucker pitches Bisson has Brown and Tubman throw, but Nathan Bedford Forrest never would.

Then all the foreigners show up: Italians, Irish, Haitian and Canadian Blacks, French Jacobins—we have a multinational invasion of the United States, which is so gawdawful stupid, not to mention capitalist, that it can't figure out how to fight back. You know all those West Pointers—Lee, Stuart, and so forth? Morons, all of them, who couldn't lead a horse to water. Not like the brigades of international socialism, who work together like a well-oiled machine in a socialist-realist painting. There's not one Robespierre or Nechayev among the marching Dantons and Bakunins; while there's an offhand mention of internal dissent, this only results in people going to other countries, which of course welcome them into their revolutions. It's not like anybody would put an ice pick through anyone's head, or anything like that.

I am being sarcastic, but I am not exaggerating. Yasmin's world comes about not, as even a propagandist might portray it, through a difficult process of putting aside small differences for a common goal, but because they're all so all-fired wonderful that it only requires fifty years to establish world peace (not to mention end hunger and cure cancer).

Very well again; this all takes place in the gap between Abraham's time and Yasmin's, not on stage; the author is interested in how revolutions start, not in how they succeed or fail. Though might one suggest that perhaps, having chosen to write the contemporary sections, the author *should* have cared, that yes, indeed, the story of that great international movement would have been complicated, and carried the story down a long divergent road—but that there are roads which, once entered on, one must follow to some kind of end?

Midway through the book, in one of the modern sections, Bisson introduces an alternate history novel in which events take place as they actually did in "our" world, right down to Abe Lincoln becoming known as The Great Emancipator. This has always seemed to me a tactical error, a ready-baited trap for alternate-world writers; inevitably the characters comment on how ridiculous the "fantasy" story is—as they do here—and inevitably it sounds self-congratulatory and artificial. (*The Grasshopper Lies Heavy*, the novel within *The Man in the High Castle*, is definitely not "our" history.) The book is even called *John Brown's Body*, a reference to a song that would never have been written in Bisson's world. A writer who is capable of seeing that his revolution would divide Emerson from Thoreau (though, as usual, this is mentioned and thrown away unelaborated) is capable of better than that.

We're told, a considerable number of times, that the black slaves

John M. Ford is the author of several novels, among them *The Dragon Waiting* and *The Scholars of Night*.

have become adept at concealing their real feelings, showing an acceptable face to their white masters (what our reality calls "shucking and jiving"), and are apparently supposed to find it a worthy and noble skill; however, when an elderly white woman uses the same tactic on Yasmin, we're to understand—we are told quite plainly—that she's a contemptible old racist bitch. The museum curator Grissom throws the woman's copy of *John Brown's Body* into the river and proudly professes his intent to begin treating her like dirt. Another triumph for socialism and the dignity of man.

I may be missing an intentional irony here, but I can find little reason to think so. Now, it's the blurb writer who calls Yasmin's world a "utopia," not Bisson (as indeed he couldn't, without stepping outside the frame), but the details of the world he has chosen to show us are all positive, either homey and nostalgic or high-tech and environmentally sound. Not to put to fine a point on it, the only bad people in this book are the reactionaries against the Bright New Order, and not a tear is spared for them. (Bobby Lee and his counterrevolutionary army are portrayed as positively subhuman, B-movie SS stormtroopers.) Well, hell, any social rearrangement, Marxism or Prohibition or the ERA or chattel slavery, will work if nobody puts up a fuss about it. The entire history of human social changes teaches that someone *always* does put up a fuss. The trick is to assimilate the reactionaries, irreverentists, and Folks Who Just Don't Fit without resorting to the Gulag, the Bloody Assize, or the Zyklon-B. Somehow or another, everybody in Bisson's alternate Now has signed the Universal Declaration of the Rights of Man, the dictatorship or the proletariat has withered away, and I don't believe a word of it.

In the second flogging of the straw novel *John Brown's Body*, the sociopolitical background completely ceases to make sense. The world, you see, was *already* mostly socialist-utopian. Africa is united—no, and not under Chaka Zulu, either (so how can there be a slave trade?), there's been a Russian Revolution (led by whom? Bakunin? Tolstoy?) and an English Civil War (I have to assume this isn't the Cromwellian one, or if it was, that no Restoration followed—but wait a minute, England is presented as an evil colonial power—oh, never mind). God knows what happened to the Hapsburgs. Or


the Vatican....

The most extraordinary logical gap is the complete absence of religion. Not only do none of the contemporary characters seem to have any trace of religious feeling, the historical ones display a contempt for faith—not just its trappings, and hypocritical professions, which do appear—but the thing itself. There is one scene in a church—a speech by Frederick Douglass—but it might as well take place in a music hall. Considerable mention is made of John Brown's possessing Sharps repeating rifles, provided by "abolitionists," but not a word about who those providers were. In our world, guns for abolition were known as "Beecher bibles," after the Reverend Henry Ward Beecher. He isn't in the book. There are Irish revolutionaries, who (of course) kick the British off their island, but none of them seem to be either Catholic or Protestant. No one is Jewish, no one is Islamic. (There's one reference to "a Jewish mother on a vid sitcom." I guess some stereotyping is okay in utopia.) Not one of the numerous revolutionary movements named has any religious component at all. Where did they all go?

Again, if Bisson had chosen to make some kind, any kind, of case for the masses kicking their opiate habit, things would be different. But he doesn't.

The weaknesses in the Abraham narrative are forgivable because the story and its characters are so affecting and absorbing and real. Before the book was half over, I was actively dreading the interruption of the story by the smug, self-absorbed contemporary characters in their pastebord world. Did I mention that, oh yes, Yasmin comes to terms with her widowhood and her daughter, and everything turns out just warm and huggable for them? But you knew that. I knew it ten pages into the book.

I'm back to what I didn't intend to do: criticizing *Fire on the Mountain* for not being a completely different book. But I'm more than disappointed. I'm angry: it's not possible to hold a dialogue over this book, to argue with it, even to agree with it on reasoned grounds, because everything in it happens by magic. I can see the novel that this could have been, and it would have been a dazzling, visionary, magnificent book.

But this isn't it. Damn it. 

The Legacy of Heorot by Larry Niven, Jerry Pournelle, and Steve Barnes

New York: Pocket Books, August 1988; \$4.50 paperback; 352 pp.

Reviewed by John Cramer

When *The Legacy of Heorot* appeared last year I put off reading it for some time. I disliked the telegraphic title, and I didn't fancy reading yet another reprise of *Beowulf*. John Gardner's *Grendel* had earlier more than satisfied my requirements in that area. But I could not ignore a new novel by Larry Niven & Co. for long. So eventually I got past the title and the *Beowulf* premise and read it. I discovered that *The Legacy of Heorot* is actually a good book. More to the point, it's an interesting book, worthy of serious critical attention.

I should confess at the outset that I never cared much for *Beowulf*. At Edgar Allan Poe Elementary School our teachers, no doubt to gain a few moments of peace, would pack us off for an hour to the library with instructions to read something worthwhile. Almost by accident I discovered on a low shelf, next to the dreary *Children's Stories from the Bible*, the row of books about Greek mythology. They were full of wonderful tales about brave and clever heroes and gossipy reports of the carryings-on of the gods.

When every book in that row had been systematically devoured, I moved down the shelf to the Nordic and Anglo-Saxon mythology. It was there that I first encountered *Beowulf*. He was not my idea of a hero. He was a loud, beer-drinking braggart who seemed better suited to leading a motorcycle gang than to starring in an epic poem. He argued and guzzled all night like some of my father's more disreputable friends. Instead of using magic weapons or clever tricks, he fought Grendel while stark naked. He killed the monster by tearing off its arm, making a bloody mess of the meat hall, and

angering its nasty vindictive mother in the bargain. It all seemed closer to Big Time Wrestling than high heroics.

Still, reading *Beowulf* at an impressionable age did have its advantages. By some quirk of memory I could recall the epic almost verbatim, and I soon discovered that this gave me status with English teachers. They, like the press, are fixated on The First, The Oldest, and The Earliest (which are more readily identified than The Best). At the drop of an essay question, I quoted freely from *Beowulf*, the first work of literature (and the oldest monster yarn) in the English language.

The Legacy of Heorot's *Beowulf* tie-in is handled with welcome moderation and restraint. The novel is set in mankind's new toehold colony on Avalon, the fourth planet of the Tau Ceti system. An expedition sponsored by the National Geographic Society has established Avalon Colony on New-Guinea-sized Camelot Island on a high bank of the salmon-laden Miskatonic River. One hundred and sixty colonists have traveled from Earth on the starship *Geographic* across 12 light years of space and 80 years of time in cold sleep to their new home. They erect the buildings of the proud new colony and begin to consider themselves the self-sufficient masters of this new world. And then the monster comes, and the killings begin....

I won't describe what follows, except to say that it closely parallels the events of the *Beowulf* epic. But there are major differences. The *Beowulf*-analog in *Legacy* is Cadmann Weyland, a gruff individualist with a military background. In the classic epic *Beowulf*, with his noble bearing and obvious bravery, is instantly regarded by all as a hero-in-the-making. Cadmann of *Legacy*, in contrast, is a near-outcast, regarded by his fellow colonists as an

John Cramer is the science columnist for Analog and the author of a forthcoming science fiction novel, Twist.


over-cautious militarist dinosaur. Beowulf became the resident hero of Heorot after the slaying of Grendel. Cadmann leaves the colony in resentment and disgust. And so on.

Legacy is good hard science fiction, with excellent characterization and a meticulously logical plot. Scientific problem solving is a dominant theme of modern hard science fiction, and *Legacy* exploits this theme very well. The alien biology and its implications are worked out with characteristic Niven/Pournelle style. The survival of Avalon Colony depends on gaining a thorough understanding of the ecology and biology of Avalon, deceptively similar to Earth but alien at its heart. They ultimately succeed, but only at great cost.

On another level the subtext of *Legacy* is that the basic human instincts toward caution and defensiveness should be trusted because the universe is, in part, populated with monsters. That was excellent advice in the seventh century and is perhaps equally good for colonists on new and unexplored planets. I'm not sure how appropriate it is for the modern world, where we are threatened most directly by the defensive instincts of other human beings. However,

a corollary of this subtext is that the best general defensive strategy for dealing with monsters is by understanding them. That, I think, is a message appropriate for all times.

If I have a complaint about *Legacy* it is with the upbeat ending. *Beowulf* is supposed to be a tragedy. That, after all, is the epic's essence: the heroic life and tragic death of the protagonist. Is tragic SF a tabu of the field? Is the readership so self-indulgent as to be unable to accommodate tragedy in their reading diet? Do the economics of contemporary publishing not permit the publication of SF in which the hero dies tragically at the end? Perhaps the *lumpen* fans would riot in midtown Manhattan and pull down the publishing houses if the sacred and traditional happy-ending of science fiction were desecrated. But surely an exception could have been made in this case. *Beowulf* is supposed to, goddammit, die heroically but tragically at the end of the epic. There is no viable alternative. If you're going to do an homage to an epic, you should play by epic rules.

But it would make it hard to write a sequel... 

Susan Palwick

I Was a Teenaged Crud Fan: Confessions of an Uptown Girl

Part 2 of 3: The Night of the Dancing Tribbles



By my freshman year in high school, two years after that first *Star Trek* convention, my personal evolution—complicated as it was by surging hormones and a deteriorating family situation—had nonetheless progressed nicely. I was marginally more attractive at fourteen than I'd been at twelve (the braces were off, I had a better haircut, and electrolysis had worked wonders), and my hours of arduous writing practice had begun to pay off. Composition came much more easily; the stories I put on paper more closely resembled the ones in my head, and my teachers praised my talent.

I was still paralyzed by social anxiety, although people were much kinder in high school than they'd been in junior high. After the first week of school—when my tears in response to some teasing drew contrite apologies, instead of renewed attacks—no one bothered me. The social exclusion once expressed as adolescent cruelty had, seemingly overnight, metamorphosed into its adult form of benign neglect. My deepest fears were now of being ignored, unnoticed and invisible, a fate I'd have welcomed two years earlier.

I had, however, developed some sense of how to use my differences as social strengths. Helping people with homework wasn't a bad thing, if you liked the people you helped and they could help you back. One of my closest friendships that year, with an outgoing, athletic, popular girl named Debbie, consisted largely of hours spent solving geometry proofs on the phone.

My improved interpersonal skills paid off: I had four or five friends, instead of only one. Much to my wonderment, I became the hub of a fragile social group which revolved around lunchtime discussions of, yes, *Star Trek*. I couldn't even call it a clique—it was just a group of girls who sat together in the cafeteria—but it meant a lot to me. I'd never had anyone to sit with at lunch before, and knowing that I wouldn't have to try to fasten myself to the edge of someone else's social circle, or eat alone, brightened the day immeasurably. Newest of all, everyone was my friend first, and connected to the others only through me.

All of us were misfits to one degree or another. Paula was a freshman whose family had just moved to New Jersey after thirteen years in Japan, where her parents were Episcopal missionaries. Tired of being a *gaijin* sequestered in a tiny American community, she'd longed to return to the United States, where everyone would be as fair and blue-eyed as she was. Finding herself in the predominantly black and Jewish Englewood school system came as quite a shock.

Beth was a born-again Baptist who adored history and the Yankees and wore glasses even thicker than mine, and Nadia and I were born-again Trekkies. Of the four of us, Paula was by far the prettiest and Beth had by far the best sense of humor. All of us were bright, but the fundamental bonds between us were our interest in

Star Trek and our separation from large segments of the school population.


Nadia and I, by now veteran convention-goers, regaled the others with anecdotes and in-jokes: the contents of the infamous bloopers reels, the lyrics of the best filksongs, George Takei's tales of being a struggling young actor living on sauerkraut stolen from hot dog stands, DeForrest Kelly's reminiscences of how his neighbors had once helped him retrieve a lost parakeet. We analyzed episodes and compared trivia. We speculated about Spock's love life. And, at some point, we began planning an expedition to the next convention at the Roosevelt.

I don't remember who first suggested the idea, but I remember the combination of joy and panic it aroused in me. Happy as I was that I had friends, grateful as I was that I'd been able to parlay my knowledge of *Trek* trivia into limited popularity, much as I longed to be part of the kind of teenage group which chattered loudly on buses, I knew that the expedition under discussion might well expose my weaknesses and endanger my newfound acceptability.

I neither gave nor attended parties and had little sense of social etiquette in such situations. Outside the limited scope of cafeteria or classes, group dynamics were a frightening mystery. I thought having guests made you completely responsible for their comfort and happiness. If they didn't have a good time—if they failed to get along with me, my family or each other—it would be my fault and they'd hate me.

All of this was compounded by the fact that we would, of course, be staying with my father and stepmother, whose marriage had disintegrated into a series of drunken arguments which became progressively louder and lasted progressively longer. I knew my father was an alcoholic, although I wasn't yet capable of saying the word aloud to anyone but my mother and sister. (It would take me another five years to realize that my stepmother was too.) My feelings of inadequacy were inextricably entangled with shame at their behavior. Nadia was the only New Jersey friend who'd ever stayed over, and during the *Trek* convention the previous year my father had chased her around and around the dining room table one evening, trying to get a bite of her ice cream. She thought this was great fun and talked about what a riot he was, but I'd been furious and mortified.

I knew my friends' parents were allowing them to venture into the wilds of Manhattan because we'd be staying with responsible adults, a lawyer and his wife who had a beautiful apartment on West End Avenue. I was afraid that something would happen to shatter that story, that my friends would tell their parents terrible things about my parents, that my family and I would be proven unworthy.



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At fourteen, I was no more capable of verbalizing any of this than I would have been of beaming aboard the Enterprise. Plans for the convention proceeded. Beth couldn't come, but she was replaced by a quiet, polite boy named Greg, whom none of us knew very well. He had blue eyes and soft brown curls, and played the cello.

Nadia and I had talked about writing a fanzine or joining one of the Trek fan clubs, but we'd never gotten around to it. We kept to ourselves at conventions, attending programming during the day and returning to the apartment by our 9:00 curfew. Nadia decided that this time, since there would be four of us, we should prepare a skit for the masquerade.

With her usual implacable energy, she planned and choreographed a dance called the Tribble Trot, to be performed to a newly-released disco version of the *Star Trek* theme. The costumes consisted of tights and large round pillows of fake fur (lined and extending from the neck to mid-thigh) which one pulled over one's head. There were holes for the arms, although the bulk of the costume limited arm movement significantly.

The only problem was picking a partner. Paula wasn't going to be caught dead wearing fake fur, and everyone knew I couldn't dance. Greg was elected by default, although it made sense to choose a male partner who, since he was a musician, had performance experience. My job would be to position my tinny Panasonic tape recorder next to a microphone and push the play button, and Paula would sit in the audience and tell us how wonderful we'd been afterwards.

The Big Dance Is Jitters

We arrived in New York with our luggage and two Hefty trash bags containing the costumes, and Nadia decided it was time for a dress rehearsal. My stepmother rolled up the living room rug and helped us push the furniture out of the way, and Nadia handed Greg his trash bag and tights.

Tights? He paled; he hadn't known he'd have to wear tights. Did he really have to wear tights?

Yes, he did. They matched the costume.

But—

Read This

Recently read and recommended by **Gene Wolfe**:

Aegypti, by John Crowley. The novel you give friends who think modern fantasy is juvenile rubbish. Heh, heh!

Arabesques: More Tales from the Arabian Nights, edited by Susan Schwartz. Gaudy, gorgeous, and grand fun.

The Architecture of Fear, edited by Kathryn Cramer and Peter D. Paulz. Joyce Carol Oates meets Karl Edward Wagner in a book that will make you think much, much better of parking garages.

The Drabble Project, edited by Rob Meades and David B. Wake. One hundred short-shorts, each of exactly one hundred words.

Drowning Towers, by George Turner. Near-future, urban Australia, a powerful proletarian novel.

The Model, by Robert Aickman. Haunting fantasy in Czarist Russia.

Swordpoint, by Ellen Kushner. A real novel about a professional duelist you can't help caring about.

Terry's Universe, edited by Beth Meacham. Science fiction for thinking readers.

Writers of the Future: Volume IV, edited by Algis Budrys. Just what it says—read it and you can say you saw 'em in the minors.

—August 1988

They matched the costume. The costume would be ruined if he didn't wear them.

Nadia had spent a lot of time and money making those costumes; she wasn't about to let her partner wimp out on her. Greg swallowed and headed off to change, returning a few moments later as a green angora tribute with matching green tights and a very red face. The costume didn't really, he explained painfully, come down far enough. (He was several inches taller than she was, and the costumes were the same size.) It was okay if he just stood there, but he was afraid that if he moved too much...well, couldn't he wear shorts under it?

Nadia (clad as a brown, short-haired tribble) was becoming annoyed. No, he couldn't wear shorts! Shorts would look completely stupid. Tribbles didn't wear shorts—

Tribbles didn't have legs! They didn't need to wear shorts.

Nadia remained unmoved. Greg didn't need shorts either. There'd be no shorts, and that was the end of it.

I hit the play button on the tape recorder, and Nadia taught Greg the Tribble Trot. It was a wonderful routine combining the Lindy, the Monkey, the tango, the waltz, and several other steps of Nadia's own devising. It was charming and funny and took full advantage of the costumes; at one point the two tribbles, attempting to rush into one another's arms, instead bounced off each other and flew to opposite ends of the stage. Greg performed like a troupier, although once he fell and slipped halfway out of the costume. He quickly regained his feet, but after that he insisted on wearing sneakers.

Throughout all of this, my stepmother fought to keep a straight face. "That poor kid," she said several years later, shaking her head and laughing, "I felt so sorry for him. The rest of you really put him through hell."

Our cruelty was unintentional, but that didn't make it any less real. The pressure on Greg was even greater because he hardly knew any of us; he was trying very hard to be a good guest and a good sport. For all the misery we'd endured, neither Nadia nor I understood the particular, agonizing self-consciousness of fourteen-year-old boys. I think Paula was a little more sensitive, but she was also a first-time visitor and wasn't going to speak up. And my stepmother didn't think it was her place to interfere.

I suffered from my own self-consciousness that weekend. Greg slept on the living room couch, but Nadia, Paula and I slept dormitory style in the guest bedroom, which shared a wall with the master bedroom. That first evening, I awoke to the dreaded sounds of my father and stepmother arguing. Their words rose and fell, never entirely intelligible, in tones of increasing viciousness.

I lay with my stomach knotted. Were Paula and Nadia awake? How could they still be asleep, with that screaming coming from the next room? Paula turned in her bed, and I was convinced that she must be listening to every slurled curse and insult. Would she scorn me in the morning? Would she pity me? What would she say, and how would I react?

In the morning I couldn't tell if anyone had heard or not. Nadia and Paula seemed subdued and avoided looking at me, but no one said anything directly. I think I would have felt better if they had. As it was, I didn't know if I'd imagined their discomfort, or if it was real but only a product of sleepiness, or if this was just how people acted when waking up in strange houses.

Everyone was edgy that morning. My father and stepmother were hung over and probably still angry with each other; I was nervous, and the others, taking their cue from me, were very quiet.

This was in the days when bus fare was still thirty-five cents. On the top shelf of my father's closet was a dented green and yellow tin containing spare change. Paula and Greg didn't have exact change for the bus, so I got out the tin and began handing out quarters and dimes, refusing the dollar bills my friends offered in return. Part of this misplaced generosity came from having watched my father's extravagant displays of cash—we dined in lavish restaurants, and he often paid for small amounts of groceries with hundred dollar bills—but I'm sure it was also an attempt to buy acceptance, to smooth over whatever awkwardness my friends had felt or witnessed.

It didn't work. Greg and Paula looked confused and worried, and when my father entered the bedroom and realized what was

happening he quickly put a stop to it. The tin was fine for making change, but we had to pay our own bus fares. (I don't think I realized how financially strapped he was then. The lavish dinners continued, but over the next few years he had to sell his camera equipment to pay the rent, and that dented tin started funding household expenses. I remember my stepmother sitting on the floor, patiently rolling pennies so she could take them to the bank and get bills.)

The Big Dance II: Climax and Anti

Once we got on the bus, lugging our Hefty trash bags and my little tape recorder, my mood lightened considerably. I again felt in control; I knew how to act at conventions, and I knew that there'd be enough happening that I wouldn't be solely responsible for my guests' amusement.

The Roosevelt was filled with the usual assortment of busy yeomen in miniskirts and gangly boys in Spock ears. Greg and Paula deposited the Hefty bags at the luggage check, and Nadia and I went to register our skit for the masquerade that evening. The committee person who took our form read it, raised her eyebrows, and said, "Dancing tribbles? You guys had better be really good. David Gerrold's one of the judges, and he's gotten so sick of tribble jokes that he'll probably disqualify you. He's even made a public announcement in it: no more tribble jokes."

"Oh, great," Nadia said. "That's just wonderful." But we both thrived on impressing adults, and I think the challenge of having to wow David Gerrold heightened our anticipation.

As the masquerade approached I got butterflies in my stomach. Once Nadia and Greg had changed into their costumes, they drew appreciative smiles, but I was just the skinny kid with the tape recorder. Clutching my Panasonic, I was convinced I'd hit fast forward instead of play, trip over some Mike wire on stage, or otherwise mess up the act, estranging myself from Nadia and Greg and earning Gerrold's undying wrath.

In fact, I didn't do very well. The skit ahead of ours was a group of three galactic troubadours; as we waited in line, I inadvertently banged one of the performers' guitars with my tape recorder, receiving a hiss of indrawn breath and a glare in response to my stuttered apologies. The guitar mustn't have been seriously harmed, because the troubadours were wonderful, singing original material in clear, strong voices with accomplished instrumental accompaniment. Their songs were about the loneliness of space travel and the profundity of the stars, and we knew we had a tough act to follow.

Nadia and Greg trotted onto the stage and waited for me to start the music. My hands shook as I positioned my Panasonic next to the mike, and when I hit the play button a blast of music came out, distorted by feedback. People in the front rows winced, and somebody yelled, "Turn it down!" I did, and somebody else motioned for me to get off the stage.

Feeling ill, I ran into the wings, but I relaxed as the skit progressed. I couldn't see Nadia and Greg very well, but the audience kept laughing. The act got thunderous applause, and when I ran back out to retrieve the tape recorder I saw that David Gerrold, sitting at the judge's table just below the stage, was wiping tears from his face.

"He *loved it*!" Nadia exulted as we left the stage. "Did you see him? He was on the floor, he was laughing so hard! We won: I know we did."

Nadia and Greg had to stay with the other contestants, but I was now superfluous. Tired and relieved, I made my way to the balcony, where Paula and I had agreed to meet.

She'd managed to save a seat for me, no mean feat in that crowd. "Were they good?" I asked as I sat down. "I couldn't see them from where I was. Do you think it went well?"

"Everybody loved it," Paula said, frowning, "but they all thought Greg was a girl. I kept hearing people say, 'Look at those two cute girls in the tribble suits.' I sure hope he doesn't find out."

"That's too bad," I said, but—despite the comments I'd endured two years earlier about having more boy juices than girl juices—Greg's plight didn't seem terribly important. I peered over the edge of the balcony and watched Gerrold shuffling his judging forms. "I

sure hope we won."

The galactic troubadours won, but we were satisfied; they were, after all, much older than we, and they'd done a serious act. We were only beginners with a comic skit. Nadia spoke to a committee member who volunteered the information that the judging had been very close, and that we'd certainly been in strong second place. For a bunch of novice high school kids, we decided, that wasn't bad at all.

Now I wonder how old those troubadours were, and whether they ever made broader use of their considerable talents. I suspect they were college students, and I entertain the wishful hope that they've become working, professional musicians, even if only playing coffee houses and passing a hat.

I know they might not appreciate such a sentiment. Throughout high school and college, my teachers worried that I liked science fiction so much. I was bright and talented, and they didn't want me to waste my abilities on such a narrow field. At the time, I condemned their own narrow-mindedness. Now I know that their concern for me was identical to mine for the galactic troubadours.

My wishes for the troubadours reflect the bias of an amateur writer turned pro—and the preference of a particular persuasion of professional writer for original, personal material over shared-world anthologies. At about the time when I started believing I might one day be able to sell my own stories, I became disturbed by the amount of talent and energy being expended in fandom—and especially in media fandom—on producing new variations of borrowed material. (There are, of course, commercial Trek novels, although the creative pitfalls remain the same. I once heard an editor on a convention panel say that you could always identify early non-Trek novels by Trek writers. They unflinchingly featured spacecraft with sensitive captains, multiracial crews, and half-breed science officers.)

These are the easy ways in which most professionals can feel superior to many fans, and in which those fans careful to label themselves as "readers" can feel superior to kids in tribble suits. The physical and social tolerance upon which we in the SF community pride ourselves masks infinite layers of intellectual snobbery. You can have green skin, pointed ears, missing limbs and no manners whatsoever—but, by God, you'd better have an alert and intelligent mind and do markedly original things with it. We're every bit as cruel to the pretty, boring cheerleaders of the world as they ever were to us. Never mind that, so many years after high school, they'll never notice or care.

At the Hudson River Festival this year, I saw a button which read "Being Weird Isn't Enough." Compare that to all those convention buttons which say, "Reality is a Crutch for People Who Can't Handle Science Fiction." I don't wear buttons, myself—since part of my own intellectual snobbery is a distaste for expressing individual convictions in mass-market forms—but if I did, I'd wear the first one and not the second.

The science fiction subculture is based on exclusion of people with mental limitations, just as so many of our high school subcultures were based on exclusion of people with social and physical limitations. But—arriving finally at David's request that I write about social maladjustment—one of the problems with the field is that the limitations we've defined as acceptable come to be considered virtues: Not knowing the difference between formal and informal dress isn't ignorance of social codes, but a carefully reasoned statement in rejection of them. Interrupting people in the middle of sentences isn't rudeness, but impatience with silly and outmoded mundane rituals. Science fiction isn't a highly specialized genre with a limited readership, but the Only True Form of Literature.

One shouldn't make fun of people's shortcomings, but it's not always correct to proclaim them brave, revolutionary acts, either. I think recognition of this dynamic explains the frequent discomfort of people at the top of the SF hierarchy with those at the bottom, not to mention the unease of people outside SF with those who remain staunchly loyal to it.

I understand that unease a lot better now than I did when I was fourteen; the simplest way to describe it is to talk about costumes. [Concluded next issue...]

Forbidden Sex and Uncontrollable Obsession

continued from page 1

voices—although I think the book is a failure, it's a clearly well-intentioned and thoughtful one. In the course of the book, however, he perfectly exemplifies one prototype of such cliché: the lesbian who has never met a good man.

The Femocrats are rabid man-haters who keep their "breeders" locked in chambers awaiting the entrance of a woman who orders them to expose their "piercers" and copulate. Heterosexuality outside of the chambers is perversion and is dealt with severely. The following passage describes what happens when a renegade Femocrat, Cynda Elizabeth, fulfills her fantasy and has voluntary sex with a man:

He was brutal, quick, and hard; then languid, tender and slow; then urgent and building; then easy and smoldering again. He was unexpectedly subtle, varying rhythms like a master musician.

Stars swirling overhead at crazy angles. Wet coldness at her fingertips. An enormous weight pulsating against her. A building, keening, rising wave of unbearably sweet tension that—

—broke into a flash of painful pleasure exploding from her lips in a wordless scream—

This prose could garnish any cheap romance novel. Even granting that sex scenes are hard to write, Spinrad, when he isn't drowning in cliché, can write better laundry lists. Of course, Cynda Elizabeth's life is irretrievably changed by her encounter with forbidden sex, and the decisions she ultimately makes (while thankfully less predictable than they might be) are completely and forever altered because she has experienced the most unthinkable sexual act in her culture. It isn't even the man that's important (although the implication is that her orgasm is stronger and better than she's ever experienced with woman) it's her chance to try the forbidden—because, to Spinrad, the forbidden is always the best.

Spinrad's inability to write clearly about the behavior of characters in the grip of sexual frustration reaches far greater heights in *The Void Captain's Tale*. To the extent that a book can be separated from an absurd premise, *Void Captain* is in many ways a highly successful novel. Spinrad creates a fascinating culture (which he visits again in *Child of Fortune*) and the book is extremely well-written, in an individual, captivating polyglot style.

Void Captain is based on one questionable premise and one sexual fantasy cliché. The questionable premise is that "the orgasmic potential of the female of our species transcends that of the male" and concomitantly, that men thereby have the power to provide pleasure to a woman which is genetically denied to themselves. (Granted, this attitude is Genro's, as all quotations from the book are Genro's, not Spinrad's. However, within the book, it is never either examined or challenged. Since determining where Spinrad supports and agrees with Genro and where he diverges would be intrusive at best and, impossible at worst, I have chosen to discuss *Void Captain* from the text alone. If Spinrad's dubious or contradictory aural voice stands in counterpoint to Genro's, I have been unable to hear it—which may be my failure as a reader. Other readers are encouraged to go to the text and draw their own conclusions.)

Void Captain's sexual cliché is perhaps the most transparent depiction of woman-as-gadget ever: interstellar travel depends on having a woman ("the necessary unseen fleshy module in the machinery of function") experience orgasm while hooked into the ship's circuits. Her orgasm, which causes the ship to jump instantaneously through space, is mechanically initiated by the ship's Captain from a distant control room. The woman "must be incapable of ordinary orgasm at the touch of congruent flesh." These women are called Pilots, although they have no navigational duties and no control over how far or in which direction they jump the ship. The Captain and his crew set the coordinates and control direction, and intensity of organism determines distance. Most Pilots' greatest

(perhaps only) pleasure is in the remote hands of men whom they are never supposed to meet. But in *Void Captain* the Captain and the Pilot do meet—and the Captain becomes obsessed with the orgasms of his Pilot.

Pilots are generally "pallid, slack-jawed, ill-smelling creatures hardly capable of social intercourse at all," presumably because the search for sexual encounter is the only motivation for cleanliness or decoration. Dominique Alia Wu, Genro's Pilot, is different. Like so many of Spinrad's characters, she is obsessed with sex she can't have—but instead of being obsessed with fleshly sex, she is obsessed with perfect sex with the ship, an endless orgasm. She knows that if Genro jumps the ship without coordinates, jumps Blind into the void, she will die, but she believes that as she does she will experience that infinite, perfect release.

Genro's and Dominique's tandem obsessions increase logarithmically. Genro grows cool towards the exotically varied sexual experiences available to him on the voyage, in favor of having the Pilot bring him to orgasm while whispering in his ear how inferior his sensations are to what she experiences in a jump. Wouldn't most people at least pause to wonder how she could know? Genro never does. As his obsession grows, Genro insists on engaging in coitus with the Pilot and actually brings her to orgasm. (Wasn't that supposed to be impossible? Perhaps, like Cynda Elizabeth, she simply never met a good man before. Taking the book on its own terms, this is one of the weakest points—why should she experience orgasm with Genro, and once she does, why shouldn't she become incapable of Piloting the ship now that she has known fleshy orgasm?) Immediately after they finish, however, she explains that her experience was, "Only a shadow [of the jump orgasm]. . . . Even *that*, liebe Genro. You know it as well as I." And he seems to agree with her.

The opportunity for Genro to grant Dominique her ultimate desire (always and forever unavailable to him) inevitably eclipses his duty to his passengers and crew, let alone to himself. Here is Eve, tempting Adam to the destruction of the species, for her own fleeting (or endless) pleasure. And here also is the outcome of the book's premise that a person in the grip of sexual obsession cannot regain his/her grasp of rational values.

But the ultimate fantasy twist on the scenario comes at the extreme end of the book. The Blind Jump is complete; the Pilot is dead. The only possibility for return to known space is to find a woman on board ship who can replace her—and Genro, with his intimate knowledge of the dead Pilot, decides that "each volunteer for the Pilot's module will submit to my tantric ministrations." His obsession with one woman and her ultimate orgasm fades as soon as she dies at his hand; his thoughts turn quickly to women who were nothing to him while Dominique was available. Some readers claim that Genro sees this as a boring responsibility rather than a sexually tantalizing prospect, yet the text seems clear:

As Dominique seduced me into the final unresisting surrender through his cognate in the flesh, mayhap I might not now mold another in her image through my own premarital knowledge? . . . May not my tantric puissance and my Great and Only knowledge with unlikely fate combine to create for us a Pilot who will take us to safe harbor, thereby rendering me the equally unlikely hero of an outré romance?

Perhaps Genro Kate Gupta cannot be called a hero in *Void Captain*, but certainly he is intended to be a sympathetic character, trapped in a tragedy not entirely of his own making. To me, however, he is little more than a self-centered, short-sighted fool even more dangerous to those for whom he is responsible than he is to himself—never attaining the tragic because he is so permanently mired in the pathetic.

The great unanswered question of *Void Captain* (unless we take the opening hypothesis as answer) is "What did Genro gain, learn or achieve by stranding his ship in the Void?" If, as I perceive it, the final response is "someone else's perfect orgasm (and death), maybe" this can hardly engender a great deal of either sympathy or admiration.

Perhaps with so much preparation, I should not have been surprised by "Journals of the Plague Years" (in *Full Spectrum*, Aronica & McCarthy, eds., Bantam Spectra, 1988). "Journals of the Plague Years" was to have been a novel concerning the future of AIDS, but editor Lou Aronica asked Spinrad to refine the original proposal into a novella instead. Unfortunately, "Journals" is so completely marooned in the tunnel of sexual obsession and fear that almost all of Spinrad's skill in narrative, entertainment and even intelligent consistency disappears. AIDS is certainly a frightening, highly charged and emotional topic, yet it is hard to forgive Spinrad for having lost track, as he appears to have done, of most of his talent and all of his ability to think out plot and deal in cause and effect.

In "Journals" the AIDS virus has mutated many times and is pandemic in the population. The unavailability of safe unprotected sex (known in the argot of Spinrad's near future as "meatsex") is the overwhelming disaster of the times and controls all behavior. Somehow the prohibitions surrounding meatsex seem much more controlling than the actual effects of the Plague. Safe sex is available through interfaces (apparently high-tech, extensive version of condoms and vaginal sheaths) or from sex machines. In *Void Captain*, where fleshly sex is plentiful, both main characters are obsessed with machine-induced orgasms, while in "Journals" everyone is obsessed with flesh. Everyone carries a card which is blue if they are clean, and black if they have Got It. Fake blue cards flourish.

"Journals" is first premise is that the current sexually active generation is the first to have been tormented by the dangers of unprotected sex. "For twenty years, sex and death were inextricably entwined. For twenty years, men and women were constrained to deny themselves the ordinary pleasures of straightforward, unencumbered sex, or to succumb to the natural desires of the flesh and pay the awful price," says the slightly farther-future writer of the prologue. Spinrad does not acknowledge that given the flaws of all known forms of birth control, unprotected sex has *always* been unsafe for women—yet somehow sexual drives have generally been slaked or sublimated without overwhelming social destruction. He also seems to forget the history of pre-AIDS venereal diseases, which have periodically made unprotected sex disastrously dangerous for both sexes.

One main character, Dr. Richard Bruno, Gets It after his wife refuses to have meatsex with him on his fortieth birthday, although they both have blue cards and have been faithful to each other. Furious with her, he finds refuge in a meatbar and gets unlucky. Fortunately, he's a genetic synthesizer, already on the trail of a cure, and in the ten weeks between his infection and his next test, he devises such a cure and promptly injects himself with it. The possibility of this cure being transmitted by injection is never mentioned again—I can only speculate that Spinrad was forced to disregard this possibility because his storyline moves from the implausibly forced to the completely impossible if he does not disregard it.

Bruno's beloved son, Tod, age 14, has been unable to resist the lure of the meatbars, and, predictably, he also Gets It. But Bruno can transmit the "dreadnaught" cure to Tod, venerationally. He hires a meatwhore to copulate with him, be infected with the dreadnaught and then pass it along to his son. In fact, of course, Bruno has a more direct option for protecting Tod (even ignoring the good old-fashioned syringe) but Spinrad has always shied from confronting homosexuality in his fiction and this is no exception.

Although he can only protect Tod through the medium of this prostitute (remember woman-as-gadget?), Bruno can protect his wife more directly. Although she is terrified of sex and celibate, nonetheless, he rapes her for her own safety. He does have reservations: "It was brutal and horrible and I loathed myself for what I was doing even as I knew full well that it was ultimately right."

At this point wish-fulfillment cliché kicks in to the point of complete absurdity (perhaps you thought it already had). Bruno, his son, his wife and the meatwhore all carry the dreadnaught. But it's the men who matter:

No other men in all the world had the possibility of enjoying sex as Tod and I did. Meat on meat as it was meant to be, and

not only free of fear of the Plague, but knowing that we were granting a great secret boon with our favors, that we were serving the highest good of our species into the bargain.

Spinrad's further-future frame character begins with a disclaimer that the rigors of the Plague and the deprivation of meatsex had driven the whole world insane, but that hardly justifies such an astonishingly flagrant example of turning rape into virtue and male sexuality into a "secret boon." Surely, the boons of sexuality are not secret but easily learned, not granted to one sex over the other, and never transmitted in any way other than by mutual consent and desire.

Bruno, like Gupta, is not balanced in the text by any character taking contrary positions. And, though he suffers greatly, he ultimately is the hero/martyr of the tale, the man who through superhuman efforts in the lab and in bed managed to begin exterminating the Plague and making the world safe for meatsex. To do Spinrad justice, when he sets out to bring clichés to life, he's a veritable Pygmalion.

Perhaps fortunately, "Journals" is massively implausible on other grounds. Who could swallow for an instant Spinrad's portrait of a quarantined San Francisco where everyone is contaminated and all is perfectly gentle sweetness and light, with dying saints giving meat to other dying saints on every street corner?

Read This

Recently read and recommended by John Kessel:

The Gold Coast, by Kim Stanley Robinson. Robinson's best book since *The Wild Shore*, and a metaphorical sequel: Orange County, California in 2035 in a metaphysical extrapolation of current overdevelopment trends. I especially liked the strong father/son conflict that is one of the central plot skeins. Although I thought the technology described was too much the 1980s instead of the 2030s, the book's also witty and engrossing on corrupt defense industry bidding practices.

Deserted Cities of the Heart, by Lewis Shiner. More a contemporary novel than sf, very political. Expertly handled multiple viewpoint, strong characters. I did have occasional trouble believing the female lead, but beautifully restrained writing, evocative sense of place, and it builds to a powerful conclusion that suggests there's more to the harmonic convergence than your astrologer told you: we are about to go through a prigoginic state-change. I agree.

Islands in the Net, by Bruce Sterling. Sterling evolves more toward conventional novelistic virtues without abandoning his concern for minutely extrapolated background. A more integrated plot, ideas on every page. His characters are believable (even the baby, though a little well-behaved, seems credible) and the viewpoint convincingly female. Another novel about the post-millennium world and the changes that may come. Although some of his short fiction is more perfectly realized, this is Sterling's best novel so far.

A Maggot, by John Fowles (I know it was published in 1985, but I just read it). This book, set in 1735, consists primarily of a series of depositions taken by a British attorney investigating a mysterious disappearance, but I haven't read a more gripping story in years. It's a mystery, a historical novel, and finally an sf book. The sf rationale turns out to be pretty murky; if this book were published in our genre its editor would have demanded a clearer resolution, but what impresses me, besides Fowles' remarkable skill as a storyteller, is his sociological and political concern. Despite its setting, *A Maggot* is about social change, about how the present and the past make the future—the core of sf. Great characters, penetrating ideas.

—August 22, 1988

Only the pall of Plague that hung over the city marred the sweetness of the atmosphere, and that seemed softened by the fogs, pinkened by the sunsets, lightened by the death-house gaiety and wistful philosophical melancholy with which the citizens confronted it.

How does he justify his "scientific" premise: that the dreadnaught, which theoretically encapsulates HIV-type viruses, thus protecting people from infection, would also cure the opportunistic infections of which immunodeficient patients die, within a few days, every time, so that every dreadnaught-infected person will recover?

Perhaps "Journals" would have made a better novel, because perhaps at novel length Spinrad would have been forced to think out some of his contradictions. But the overwhelming terror of being forever constrained to safe sex and, much more upsetting, the overtone of delight in the wish-fulfillment fantasy seem to be endemic to the story and would likely remain at any length. And

where Cynda Elizabeth's implausible experiences actually provide her with information on which to make decisions, and Genro's potential tragedy descends into pathos, Bruno deteriorates into a particularly repulsive solipsistic character, a transformation more upsetting and less forgivable than Genro's descent into spiritual clumsiness.

In all of these works, Spinrad is at worst underlining and reanimating attitudes and sexual clichés which are the stuff of the prevalent culture. He is not inventing new and different ways for men and women to be tyrannized by sexuality. But as he returns again and again to the familiar lures of forbidden sex, the inability of human beings to make wise decisions in sexual contexts, he limits his own range of characterization. His readers' trust in his visions is thereby severely threatened. The true tragedy is not in Cynda Elizabeth's life, nor Genro's, nor Bruno's, but in the inability of a fine and talented writer to broaden his vision enough to question rather than accept, to draw possible plans for escape rather than reinforce existing boundaries. ▶

Kathryn Cramer Sincerity and Doom:

An Eventual Review of James Morrow's *This Is the Way the World Ends*

(New York: Henry Holt, 1986; out of print, but pb forthcoming from Ace in May 1989)

Part 1 of 3

Veritas

The first thing I ever read by James Morrow was his story "Veritas," which appeared in *Synergy*, Volume I, edited by George Zebrowski (a books the sum of whose parts is greater than the whole). It's about a future in which everyone tells the truth.

By the end of the story the narrator and, seemingly, the authorial voice, come down on the side of artifice and lies—on the side of fictions, of visions which are more true than what people agree upon as the truth; on the side of art rather than of policy. I loved it!

When I saw him at Boskone, I told him I loved it. He seemed pleased at the praise. I also told him that I admired his sense of the perverse (or something to that effect; I know I used the phrase "sense of the perverse"). He looked uncomfortable (which is, I suppose, what you do when a young woman whom you don't know very well tells you she really likes your sense of the perverse. That didn't occur to me until after I'd said it). When I said I admired his sense of the perverse, I might just as easily have said his sense of symmetry, in the mathematical sense.

This same sense of the perverse is what I admire about Gaston Bachelard, a French philosopher of science, for opening his book *The New Scientific Spirit* with the paragraph:

Since William James it has often been repeated that every cultivated man necessarily subscribes to some system of metaphysics. To my mind it is more accurate to say that every man who attempts to learn science makes use not of one but of two metaphysical systems....And one contradicts the other. For convenience let us attach provisional names to the two fundamental philosophical attitudes that coexist so peacefully in the modern scientific mind: rationalism and realism...[p.1]

In fact, Morrow does seem to be up to a very Bachelardian project: In "Veritas" he shows what it would really mean if, in the future, nobody lied anymore, always telling the truth being rationally desirable, and the world he portrays being reality's distortion of the goals of rationalism. Not that Morrow seems to prefer realism over rationalism. Rather he exposes points upon which they are not congruent. He asserts a science fictional utopia (perhaps the utopia that Ender Wiggin is striving for?) and then shows what it would really mean; not what the technological side effects would be (a usual sf technique), but what meaning is inherent in the situation.

Parts of the story are quite funny: the religious posters which say "ASSUMING GOD EXISTS, JESUS MAY HAVE BEEN HIS SON" or the military recruiting posters which say "CHANNEL YOUR VIOLENT IMPULSES IN A SALUTARY DIRECTION. BECOME A MARINE"—and parts are tragic—the break-up of Gloria's marriage over the issue of her husband's extramarital affairs; when she asked why he had been unfaithful and whether, perhaps, he was using the affairs to help their marriage, he replied no, that he just liked to screw other women. ...Everyday life in a world where no one lies!

There are other true things to be said about Jesus or about joining the Marines than the texts of the abovementioned signs; there are other true things to be said about "MOLLY'S RATHER EXPENSIVE TOY STORE" than that its goods are expensive; there are other true things to be said about why Gloria's husband had affairs. The absurdity of what Morrow's characters say when telling the absolute truth makes it difficult to hang on to the illusion that Truth can be entirely contained in a set of facts.

Beyond defrocking utopia, the story hits you in the face with the uncomfortable relationship between Art (particularly fiction) and the Lie. One becomes most self-conscious about the fact that one is reading a work of fiction. Implicitly, Morrow tells you that he is lying to you and that by lying to you, he is telling you the truth: that truth resides in the act of interpretative thought; that truth is a transaction between a piece of information and the thinker; that truth is not simply a set of phrases which one can learn by rote. The dominant culture in the future society of "Veritas" cannot apprehend the Truth, because they allow themselves nothing but truths to pursue it with.

The Absurdly Utopian

This Is the Way the World Ends is an anti-nuclear-war political novel. Strictly speaking, by current generally accepted definitions, the book is fantasy (many of the events of the book being contrary to rigid scientific extrapolation), but it contains more information about current technologies than does the average science fiction novel. And certainly the book is about technology.

The book begins with the sentence, "Doctor Michel de Nostredame, who could see the future, sat in his secret study, looking at how the world would end." Nostradamus has had Leonardo Da Vinci illustrate, on glass plates, scenes from the apocalypse-to-come. These plates can be used in combination with an oil lamp as a sort of slide show. Hence the title, *This Is the Way the World Ends*.

In the year before the end of the world Americans have taken to wearing scops suits, the word "scops" standing for "Self-Contained

Post-Attack Survival."

After the bombs have been dropped, and after the human race has become extinct except for five men who are about to stand trial for the whole mess, the world is populated with the unadmitted: those who will never be born. They "live" long enough to try the six survivors: Robert Wengernook, Assistant Secretary of Defence for International Security Affairs; Major General Robert "Brat" Tarmac, Deputy Chief of Staff for Retargeting, Strategic Air Command; Brain Overwhite of the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency; William Randstable, middle-aged boy chess champion who grew up to work in missile accuracy at Sugar Brook; Reverend Sparrow, TV evangelist of the show "Countdown to God's Wrath"; and one average guy, our hero, "a man named George Paxton. A common man in many respects, but also perhaps a hero, entrapped on Fortuna's wheel and sent on a series of frightening and fantastic adventures."

George Paxton signed a statement of complicity in order to get a scops suit for his precious four-year-old daughter Holly, so that she will be safe from nuclear attack. (Needless to say, when the attack actually came, the suits didn't work.) So now he will stand trial for his part in the extinction.

While the tribunal is taking shape around him, George spends his time working toward the goal of repopulating the planet.

Again, Morrow is playing with utopia and its opposite. Its opposite, in this book, is obviously a future in which everybody dies. The absurdly utopian aspect of the book is that there is a court around afterward to try some of those responsible and to punish them severely for their misdeeds. This utopia is absurd because it is an emotional utopia rather than a material one: it is the most emotionally satisfying outcome of a nuclear war, but clearly not the most desirable, nor indeed the most likely.

In fact it's impossible. That's why this is, by current definitions more a fantasy novel than a science fiction novel. But technical definitions aside, this impossibility has more to do with Morrow's view of science fiction than it does with a choice between writing science fiction and writing fantasy. Rather, his own point of view toward the likely outcome of events is too gloomy to allow him to play the science fiction worldbuilding straight when writing about the unthinkable tragic future. Making it thinkable would downplay the tragedy. He seems to have taken much the same attitude to the universe of the average science fiction novel as Kurt Vonnegut did.

In Kurt Vonnegut's *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, the villain, Norman Mushari, goes looking for the novels of the science fiction writer Kilgore Trout to help bolster his case that Eliot Rosewater, who reads his books, is insane. He finds them for sale in a porn shop: "He didn't understand that what Trout had in common with pornography wasn't sex but fantasies of an impossibly hospitable world."

Even George Paxton's own life, pre-apocalypse, is absurdly utopian:

He had even outmaneuvered the philosophers. A seminal discovery of the twentieth century was that a man could live a life overflowing with advantages and still be obligingly happy. Despair, the philosophers called it. But the coin of George Paxton's life had happiness stamped on both sides—no despair for George. Individuals so fortunate were scarce in those days. You could have sold tickets to George Paxton. [p. 16]

And, although Morrow's world is, in a material sense, entirely inhospitable, in an emotional sense it is exactly as Vonnegut describes: an impossibly hospitable world. Unlike the writers to whom Vonnegut was presumably referring, Morrow recognizes the impossibility in the hospitality.

This book is written in reference to *Earth Abides*, *On the Beach*, *The Postman*, et al., all those post-holocaust books, and also the TV movie *The Day After*. Each of these books is immersed in its own impossible hospitality: there are survivors.

But the most extreme fantasies of an impossibly hospitable world arise in the minds of those who sincerely believe that nothing bad will come of stockpiling all those weapons, that the nuclear weapons won't be used, and that we are not on the brink of the apocalypse.

Both Morrow's book and its opposite, say, a book like *The Postman* are intended to counter this reassuring lie.

The background of *This Is the Way the World Ends* is littered with the fashionable images of the literal depictions of what would happen in the event of a nuclear war, but they stay in the background because they are not the point. Rather the point is the meaning of thinking about nuclear war. Consider, for example, his description of the moment of nuclear explosion:

Something extraordinary happened ... Something far more astonishing than a scarf materializing in a cardboard tube ... Something that the United States and the Soviet Union had been spending large amounts of diligence and money to bring about. What happened was that the winter, which would have been officially recognized by the calendar in a mere three days, and which only that morning had smothered southern New England with snow, went away.

It went away in a brilliant burst. [p. 56]

One scene in the book which particularly stays with me is the one in which the hero, George Paxton, is wandering through the post-nuclear-exchange landscape trying to get home to his wife and child. He sees a seeing-eye dog, which has had its scops suit and all its fur burned off, and exclaims, "Someone put the fur back on that dog!" Psychologically accurate for such a situation, this scene focuses the reader's attention on the surreality of the events and therefore on their meaning, rather than the mere facts of the case.

The Conservation of Thought

This is not the way truth tends to be treated in twentieth-century America. Mass production has provided a very different and seductive model of what truth is and what truth does:

In the early part of this century, Henry Ford is said to have invented the assembly line. This was the beginning of the end, if you follow either of the narratives in this essay to its apparently logical conclusion.

Individual craftspeople need no longer be expert at each and every stage of the production process, as they had been in the past, carefully crafting—from start to finish—say, a car, or, had such a thing been invented, an atom bomb. Instead, with the invention of the assembly line, engineers and inventors decide how the thing is to be built. Truth resides in the blueprint. The tasks involved in the production process are broken down into their smallest, simplest components, and these simple tasks are portioned out to people, each of whom tightens the same screw over and over, or repeatedly pulls the same lever, and none of whom need concern themselves with the design as a whole, what it is, or what it means.

As anyone who has ever worked on a political campaign knows, there is a certain amount of motion conserved by doing things assembly-line style. Even when doing a very large mailing alone, it is more efficient to stuff all the envelopes in one step, write addresses on them in the next, and slap stamps on them in the next, than it is to do all steps to each envelope before going on to the next one. You don't have to concentrate on what you are doing nearly as hard when you do something assembly-line style.

However, this is not the primary effect by which factories using the methods of mass production become vastly more efficient than those not using them. The real savings lies in the pay scale of the employees. Efficiency in business is, after all, measured by the profit-and-loss statements.

Once employees need not be paid to know and to think, once they are paid to only to litter, rinse, repeat (or whatever) from the time they arrive to time they leave, they can be paid less. The employee becomes easily replaceable, and because the tasks are simple and the employees are interchangeable, wages are much lower (sometimes by as much as a factor of ten or more.)

The next level of savings is in the salaries among managers and sales people. Since the process has already been invented, managers only need to think hard enough to make sure that employee #1739875 is pulling the lever hard enough and that employee

#98649602 is rinsing thoroughly. All the examples of a particular product should be as alike as possible so that sales people of a lower skill level are able to sell without thinking too hard. Managers and salespeople are replaceable too; therefore wages are lower.

This fragmentation of tasks has as its corollary the fragmentation of responsibility. Recall that great cliché about why one should support Mussolini: he made the trains run on time. When seeking out the individuals responsible for the unpleasant actions of a large institution, predictability becomes a serious moral question: Would most anyone else have done the same thing in the same job or in the same situation?

Predictability and conservation of thought (the systematic exclusion of the necessity that anyone think once an initial formulation has been made) go hand in hand. Predictability of performance becomes a measure of profitability, because on all levels predictability holds wages down. So in the mass-production utopia, every qualified person who might possibly hold a particular job would do the same thing in a given situation.

Once the light bulb, or the Walkman, or the dishwasher has been invented, the specifications and blueprints can be given over to factories throughout the world. Based on one design, ten thousand nearly identical lightbulbs can be manufactured—often million. The factories could produce them forever, or at least until there was a shortage of tungsten for the filaments, or somesuch. Refinements in the manufacturing process are motivated by the sincere desire to reduce the cost of production, and the sincere desire to expand (or maintain) the producer's market share.

Mass production is such a crucial element in twentieth-century American life that it is both invisible and omnipresent.

It is invisible because—with the exception of the occasional piece of art and the things that are now called "handicrafts"—nearly

everything we use in the course of a day was made on a highly automated production line. No one need mention that a dishwasher or a nuclear warhead was produced in a factory because that goes without saying, and since it goes without saying, it is therefore rarely said. And, except to those who specifically work in factories, a person may only actually see a production line a few times in his or her life. (With the flight of industry from the US and Europe to the Orient, this becomes increasingly true.)

It is omnipresent because the words, the phrases, the ideas, and the methods of mass production permeate the rest of American society and appear in contexts to which they are ludicrously inappropriate. As a professor of mine once pointed out, the instructions on a shampoo bottle derive from the language of the assembly line: "Lather, rinse, repeat," is the usual formulation. (Although my shampoo bottle says, "THE HALSA SHAMPOOING METHOD: Work the delicately scented lather through wet hair with a gentle massaging motion. Rinse with warm water. Repeat, if necessary. Avoid getting shampoo in eyes—if it does, flush eyes thoroughly with water. After shampooing, follow with Halsa Mari-gold Conditioner."—Basically the same instructions with some flowery marketing language thrown in, and the added plus of a small grammatical indiscretion.) These instructions are aimed at the complete novice, the hairwasher only qualified by intellect and training for the most rudimentary of tasks: These are production line instructions!

Aside: The author of the latter set of instructions (or perhaps only the first technical writer who came up with the idea of commanding the consumer to use yet another of the company's line of fine products) added that final line in the hope that some of the customers would actually be mindless enough to simply follow directions and use the conditioner whether it was needed or not.

(Continued next issue...) ▶

Susan Palwick

Dangerous Visions:

An Improper Review of James Tiptree, Jr.'s *Crown of Stars*

(New York: Tor, September 1988; \$18.95 hardcover; 340 pp.)

The problem with reviewing this collection is that it's difficult to fall back on the polite fiction that these stories are merely fiction. Alice Sheldon's suicide, committed moments after the murder of the ailing husband she adored, stunned the science fiction community last year. If we choose to see the murder as a mercy killing—as she certainly did—if we choose to view the suicide as a hard-headed, rational choice planned carefully and all too well by an extraordinarily intelligent woman, the irreducible horror of the situation remains. One of SF's best and brightest saw no better way out of her despair than a loaded gun.

Crown of Stars is, above all, a collection of stories about despair. All but two of them have previously been published elsewhere, and several are currently doing well in the ranks of Nebula nominations. They're finely crafted, eloquent and harrowing. This isn't one of those slapdash volumes thrown together from desk-drawer scrapings to capitalize on the death of a prominent writer; the maturity of the writing makes its darkness all the more disturbing.

The stories in *Crown of Stars* range from allegory to satire to relentless realism. What most of them share is a fierce commitment to examining the world as it is, stripped of illusions and hypocrisy. But the world as it is means the world seen through Tiptree's eyes—and her version of reality, although masterfully drawn, is a place I'm grateful I don't live in and am glad I only have to visit by choice.

Tiptree's characters grapple as best they can with forces much larger than they are: time, fate, the cruelties of civilization, an uncaring universe and their own mortality. While they're seldom wise or noble, all of them are deeply and undeniably human, and many of them are very brave. Tiptree's worldview, however, rarely allows them happy endings—and her few attempts to do so are notably less successful than her depictions of unrelieved grimness.

"Come Live With Me," for my money the worst story in the book, ends in the blissful symbiosis of alien life forms with the humans they've resurrected from death. Although I suspect Tiptree was trying to show the flip side of all those 1950s horror movies, her treatment felt flat and unconvincing, as if *Aliens* or *The Puppet Masters* had been mated with "The Honeymooners" and adapted for prime time.

Tiptree is at her strongest when the writing deals most clearly with real people: the anguish of a poor black girl giving up her baby for adoption in "Morality Meat," the bored executive who shoots himself "In Midst of Life," only to find himself wandering through a puzzling afterlife, the singularly sleazy piece of streetlife who hustles newly departed souls in "Last Night and Every Night." Tiptree's often-scalding irony is most effective when focused on particular people and social injustices; in the more explicitly allegorical pieces she tends to present futility as an integral element of the universe.

And therein lies my discomfort. Polite reviewers avoid Freudian analysis, but nearly every story in this book somehow deals with yearning for death. Such is the grace of Tiptree's writing that she frequently manages to convince you, if only temporarily, that optimism is a naive, deeply misguided notion, akin to belief in channeling or a flat earth. The woman who managed to disguise her gender so long and successfully can't, at least in hindsight, mask her fatal depression.

One of the most powerful stories, "Backwards, Turn Backwards," deals with a spoiled college beauty who, via time travel, trades places with her elderly, contented self. Unable to bear the prospect of the humiliation she learns she must suffer after she leaves school, she attempts to shoot herself in bed. At the last moment, however, she wavers and shoots her devoted but unattractive husband—and, returned to the past with no memory of the future, dies horribly

because he is no longer there to rescue her.

The parallels to Tiptree's own future, from the vantage of when she wrote the story, are unmistakable and chilling. The authorial stance within the story seems to be that the deaths are tragic and grotesque because they were unavoidable: had the character suppressed her last-minute squeamishness towards physical ugliness, had she summoned the fortitude to endure the sordid experiences from which her husband ultimately redeemed her, she would have enjoyed a wise, loving old age. Reading the story, I couldn't help wondering when Tiptree changed her mind.

Again, that's the kind of impertinent autobiographical speculation responsible reviewers shun, and with good reason. But as I read this collection, I repeatedly found myself either arguing with, or intensely disliking, characters who revelled or renounced the simple human graces of hope, humor, and social companionship: the soldier in "Yanqui Doodle" who decides to escape back to the front rather than endure detoxification from combat drugs; the deranged child in "The Earth Doth Like a Snake Renew" who scorns all human company in order to achieve union with her chosen consort (none other than the entire planet); the personification of Mother Nature in "Our Resident Djinn," who coldly informs a bemused Satan that Biblical punishment has been replaced by the law of Cause and Effect, and that the only crime—of which everyone is guilty and for which everyone must be punished—is being born.

I kept wanting to say, "No, really, it doesn't have to work that way," to shout, "Stop!" to characters descending into bitterness and fatal choices, to tell jokes or blow soap bubbles or do anything, however naive, to get these people to admit the possibility of possibilities. While my involvement with the text is a tribute to Tiptree's writing, it's also inextricably entangled with my knowledge of how she died. Alice Sheldon has removed herself from all argument; one therefore argues with her characters instead.

Even in the cheerful pieces, the ones most steeped in Tiptree's charming sense of humor, fatalism prevails. "Second Going" reveals that humanity's entire pantheon of divinities is actually a race of symbiotic (again) aliens, by whom the narrator has been abandoned; "All This and Heaven Too," a politically correct fairy tale, solves the problem of a politically incorrect marriage by faking the bride's death. Given the society Tiptree has set up, this drastic solution is entirely logical—but that, alas, is again a matter of worldview.

Future readers—and the book deserves many of them—will no doubt be able to appreciate the collection as a self-contained artifact, as I would were I being a proper reviewer. My reactions are based on a futile wish to rewrite history; nonetheless, one doesn't expect descriptions of daffodils from people in war zones. Each sentence Tiptree has written is an authentic report from the trenches of her personal struggle for survival, and the tragedy underlying every story in this collection is that its author is no longer alive to describe the battle. ▲

Necroscope by Brian Lumley

New York: Tor Books, September 1988; \$3.95 pb; 505 pp.

Reviewed by Greg Cox

Forget Ender Wiggins. Harry Keogh, the titular hero of *Necroscope*, is the real Speaker for the Dead. Or to the Dead, with the Dead, whatever. A "necroscope," you see, is, as defined by Lumley, a person who can telepathically converse with the dead as they lie in their graves. That's what dead people do, apparently, lie around thinking a lot. Sort of a bleak vision of the Hereafter, you might think, but it's not all bad. As Harry explains to his skeptical girlfriend: "The bridge-builders go on building their bridges—in their heads." Just as dead writers write, dead lovers love, dead schemers scheme—all in the Platonic afterlife of the mind. "They carry their ideas to the limits of perfection, finishing all the unfinished thoughts they never had time for when they lived. And no distractions, no outside interference, no one to bother or confuse or concern them."

Except Harry, that is. And Boris Dragosani. Dragosani is Harry's antithesis, a necromancer, which means that he extracts the secrets of the dead by physically ransacking (and sometimes consuming)

Read This

Recently read and recommended by James Gunn:

Lincoln's Dreams, by Connie Willis. A sensitively written novel about a young woman afflicted with terrifying dreams about Civil War battles and a young man, research assistant to a writer of historical novels, who gets involved with trying to save her. Borderline SF, it nevertheless treated the subject of prodromic dreams with care and won the John W. Campbell Memorial Award for the best SF novel of the year.

The Sea and Summer, by George Turner. An Australian novelist describes life in Australia when the greenhouse effect has melted the polar icecaps, beginning a process of drowning seaside cities that has been completed in a framing story. In this Dickensian world of individuals struggling to cope with difficult circumstances or to rise above them, society has begun to disintegrate under the pressures of shortages and the uselessness of large parts of the population, and people have been divided into two classes, the Sweet and the Swill.

The Unconquered Country, by Geoff Ryman. A delicate novelette published as a monograph, this parable about the Lon Nol regime in Cambodia is written with science fiction speculations.

Venus of Shadows, by Pamela Sargent. In this second substantial novel in a trilogy, Sargent continues the saga she began with *Venus of Dreams* about the terraforming of Venus and the lives of the Cythereans, the Terrans under the post-holocaust rule of the Mukters, and the Habitat dwellers who are combining their efforts in an uneasy alliance rife with personal and political conflicts.

Prelude to Foundation, by Isaac Asimov. The grand master satisfies the curiosity of his millions of readers about Trantor, the roofed-over administrative world of his galactic empire, and the beginnings of psychohistory, in this long novel about the aftermath of Hari Seldon's first speech speculating about the possibilities of such a discipline and the adventures that follow as he learns how psychohistory might really work.

The Day the Martians Came, by Frederik Pohl. In his own satirical, perceptive fashion, Pohl tells a series of insightful stories leading up to the glimpses into human nature offered by his *Dangerous Visions* contribution, "The Day After the Day the Martians Came."

—August 16, 1988

their mortal remains. Not only is this process a good deal messier than Harry's technique, there's a world of difference in the way it's perceived by the departed themselves; whereas necrospecting is just polite conversation, necromancy is an act of torture and violation. To make matters worse, Dragosani is a nasty, power-hungry type who has allied himself (for as long as it will benefit him) with both a Soviet espionage ring and a 500-year-old vampire he's found trapped beneath the soil of Boris's native Romania. (Harry, on the other hand, is an earnest British lad who joins his country's top-secret "ESPionage" squad out of a sense of duty to the living and the dead.)

Although they are unaware of each other's existence for most of the book, as both grow to manhood and full mastery of their special powers, there's never any doubt that Keogh and Dragosani are fated enemies, stripped of its more ghoulish adornments, *Necroscope* is an old-fashioned good-mutant-vs.-bad-mutant story with a lot of Cold War spy plotting to heighten the conflict. It's an elaborate, escapist

entertainment that reads like an unholy combination of A.E. Van Vogt, Frederick Forsyth, and George Romero. I enjoyed it thoroughly, for reasons I will explain shortly.

But first a word of warning is in order....

Chapter One features a graphic, ten-page description of the necromancer at work, mutilating a corpse, eating its brain, throwing blood and viscera all over the page. Although this is arguably the most grisly scene in the book, it is by no means the only contender. An avid horror fan, who has read enough in the genre to become inured to such excesses, will be able to appreciate the scene for what it is—an intentionally horrifying moment—and read on to see what else Lumley is up to. Less jaded readers, however, may well end up like the three Russian officers who witness Dragosani's demonstration: nauseous, appalled, and distinctly dubious about the whole enterprise.

This is an understandable response, but *Necroscope* is more than just another awful splatter novel in the tradition of Shaun "Spawn" Hutson and Guy "Crabs" Smith. If you have a strong stomach, are familiar with the works of Stephen King or Clive Barker, or perhaps have worked in a morgue, this is an irresistible page-turner whose ickier touches add a nicely macabre flavor to a thriller storyline blessed with three notable virtues: plotting, pacing, and imagination.

Let's talk about the plotting first. As mentioned before, the central conflict is both simple and obvious: necroscope and necromancer on a collision course with fate and each other. That doesn't stop Lumley from embroidering the story with a slew of subplots, counter-plots, and supporting characters of assorted allegiances and abilities. Harry must avenge his mother's mysterious death. Dragosani must conquer his vampire mentor. A British psychic copes with limited precognition. An Asian spy learns how to kill with a glance.... And, perhaps because the Keogh-Dragosani clash is so inevitable, the novel is able to accommodate all these sideshows without ever losing momentum or forgetting what it's about.


Part of that's the pacing. It's a long book, which means Lumley has room to develop his subplots, spear carriers, and bit players without shortchanging either of his protagonists (and, yes, Dragosani and Keogh receive roughly equal treatment) or even any of his secondary concerns. Nor does the book feel padded, as are so many modern horror novels, due to the generous banquet of characters and complications mentioned above. This is, however gruesome and

outlandish, a story that needed to be told at saga length.

Only the ending seems a little rushed; after so much build-up, the final battle between Keogh and Dragosani was spectacular but surprisingly short. Part of my disappointment, however, may have been due to the back cover blurb; having been told that *Necroscope* was the "first in a powerful new trilogy of terror," I was not expecting so, er, conclusive a conclusion.

Beyond the plotting and pacing, though, much of the fun of this book lies in its imagination, in the revelation and exploration of strange and horrific concepts. There's something very science-fictional, in fact, in the way Keogh, Dragosani, and the rest of the cast slowly uncover the limits and implications of life after death, necromancy, clairvoyance, the Evil Eye, and, ultimately, the metaphysical applications of the Möbius strip (with a little help from the shade of August Ferdinand Möbius himself). Ideas as wild as bodies get dissected here, and Lumley even manages to find twists and surprises in that most hoary and traditional of Gothic conceits: a vampire. It takes Dragosani (and the reader) most of the book to ferret out the true nature of "the Wamphyri," which turns out to be exotic enough to intrigue even this reviewer, who has read far too many conventional vampire stories.

Prior to reading *Necroscope*, I'd always thought of Brian Lumley as a ghoul in his own right, a necrophage feeding on the overpicked bones of H. P. Lovecraft. And, to be honest, this new book doesn't exactly illuminate the Human Condition the way the very best modern horror novels, such as *The Vampire Tapestry* by Suzy McKee Charnas or *Asb Wednesday* by Chet Williamson, do (unless you're seriously concerned with the civil rights of corpses); it is instead an effective, well-crafted yarn comparable to the better novels of Whitley Strieber, i.e. *The Hunger* and *The Wolfen*. Strieber has a leaner, more polished style, while Lumley in *Necroscope* is painting his nightmares in broad strokes on a much larger canvas, but when compared against such lame, sloppily-constructed horror "epics" as Ken Eulo's *The House of Caine* (to name one particularly overblown example) it's obvious that *Necroscope* succeeds in being the best Hammer Films version of James Bond found between covers. If you're stuck in airport sometime (and have slightly morbid tastes) this is the perfect book for the occasion.

Perhaps, though, not while you're eating. 

***Bare-Faced Messiah: The True Story of L. Ron Hubbard* by Russell Miller**

New York: Henry Holt, 1988; \$19.95 hardcover; 390 pp.

Reviewed by Alan C. Elms

Except for their work at the typewriter or word-processor, most science fiction writers lead disappointingly ordinary lives. The literary mainstream appears well-populated with figures like Truman Capote and Lillian Hellman, who used their creative talents to reinvent themselves so fabulously that their fiction pales by comparison. Hardly anyone in the recent history of science fiction has even distantly approached the achievements of these masters of self-creation—except for Lafayette Ronald Hubbard.

Until now, L. Ron Hubbard's autobiographical creativity was difficult to assess. In his own statements and in the Church of Scientology's hagiographies, he claimed remarkable achievements. He had become a skilled cowboy and blood brother to a Blackfoot Indian by age 10. He explored large areas of China by himself and learned the secrets of Indian "holy men" in his teens. He earned a B.S. in civil engineering with training in nuclear physics, while simultaneously becoming a skilled glider and powered-aircraft pilot, a documentary film director, a mineralogical surveyor, and a self-supporting professional writer, all during his "busy college years." He turned out "several million words" of published fact and fiction (variously estimated at four, seven, or fifteen million) before becoming a World War II naval hero. Sometime before and perhaps also during the war, he acquired "an extensive education in the field

of the human mind" from a family friend who had been a "personal student of Sigmund Freud." While recuperating in a Navy hospital from severe war wounds, Hubbard combined this knowledge with the results of his own research on human psychology and with "what he had learned of Eastern philosophy, his understanding of nuclear physics and his experiences among men," to attain a "major breakthrough" in penetrating "the mysteries and secret ways of the human mind." (The quoted passages are from a Scientology publication, *Mission into Time*.) Russell Miller says in reference to a mere portion of this list, "It would, to be sure, have been an impressive start to any young man's career, if only it had been true."

Previous books have challenged some of these claims but have offered little solid biographical information in contradiction. Until recently, Algis Budrys's 1980 statement remained accurate: "No one knows the truth of Hubbard's background or many reliable details of his life." But now, through Russell Miller's industrious use of the Freedom of Information Act, his close reading of newspaper files from around the world, his interviews with key figures in Hubbard's life, and especially his excavations in a treasure trove of forgotten Hubbard papers disclosed by a Federal court case, we can compare the mostly mundane or unsavory realities of L. Ron's personal life with the astonishing products of his autobiographical imagination.

Miller's standard pattern in each chapter is to summarize and quote from the official account of Hubbard's life at a particular time, then to detail the documented record for the same time period.

Alan C. Elms is a professor of psychology at the University of California at Davis.

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William B. Morrow



(Miller is not a psychologically wounded ex-Scientologist like most of his predecessors, but a professional British biographer fascinated by American exotics. His tone is mostly one of ironic English understatement, interrupted now and then by exclamations of amazement. Hubbard did not, for example, spend his childhood on his Navy-hero grandfather's giant cattle ranch as usually claimed, but "in a succession of rented apartments necessarily modest since his father was a struggling white-collar clerk drifting from job to job. His grandfather was neither a distinguished sea captain nor a wealthy rancher but a small-time veterinarian who supplemented his income renting out horses and buggies from a livery barn." Hubbard did major in civil engineering at George Washington University, but flunked that legendary course in nuclear physics and did little better in his other science and math courses. He dropped out at the end of his second year and never earned a college degree. While at GWU, he got several stories published in the student newspaper's literary supplement, but he hardly supported himself by his writing. His only magazine sale during this period, probably for a few dollars, was an article for a small magazine aimed at amateur pilots.

Hubbard had earlier engaged in modest embellishments of his

personal history, but the exaggerations flowered luxuriantly during his second year at GWU. Only then did he begin to claim those years of independent travel and mystical studies in the Orient—claims based in reality upon two brief tourist excursions with his parents to several cities in Japan and China, plus a year's residence in Guam when his father was stationed at the US naval base there. No explanation is given for Hubbard's sudden explosion of autobiographical creativity at this time; one might assume he was merely trying to offset his poor academic performance. But another factor was involved, not mentioned by Miller and probably unknown to him.

The editor of the literary supplement during Hubbard's final semester at GWU was Paul Linebarger, two years younger but a year ahead of him in school. Another member of the literary supplement's staff has told me that Hubbard and Linebarger soon became intensely competitive toward each other. Linebarger made good grades, wrote as fluently as Hubbard, and was equally ambitious. Linebarger held a major advantage in their bragging sessions: He really *had* lived in China for several years; he really *had* traveled extensively by himself, not only in China but in Russia; he really *had* studied the classics of Oriental wisdom and sat at the feet of Chinese gurus, including the great Sun Yat-sen. Linebarger had also conducted a passionate romance in Peking with an exiled White Russian woman several years his senior, had narrowly survived a suicide pact with her, and had participated directly in high-level secret negotiations between the US and Chinese governments—all before he was 18. Further, Linebarger was not above adding a bit of embroidery to these genuine experiences, to make them even more colorful. Is it any wonder that Ron Hubbard might thereupon dramatically expand the scope and drama of his own exaggerations, simply in order to stay competitive? And is it any wonder that when such exaggerations appeared to gain acceptance, Hubbard would try more of the same in the future? (The competition influenced Paul Linebarger's future as well. He and Hubbard did not stay in touch, but soon after Hubbard achieved best-sellerdom with *Dianetics*, Linebarger wrote a self-help manual titled *Ethical Dianetics*. That didn't sell, but Linebarger subsequently became a science fiction writer of much greater literary quality and inventiveness than Hubbard ever achieved; his pseudonym was Cordwainer Smith.)

Following the disastrous end of his academic career, Hubbard took two years to hit his speed as a professional writer. In 1934 he discovered his true element: the adventure pulps. The July 1936 claim that he already had a million words in print was probably another exaggeration, but this time it wasn't much of an exaggeration. He was churning out exotic adventure stories, detective stories, spy stories, Westerns—almost every pulp genre except science fiction and fantasy. In 1938 he met John W. Campbell Jr., who had just started editing *Astounding*, and they got along famously. According to Hubbard, the publishers of *Astounding* ordered Campbell "to buy whatever I wrote, to freshen up the mag, up its circulation, and to put in real people and real plots instead of ant men." This does not sound like an order Campbell either needed or would have accepted, but in any case he did publish a large part of Hubbard's output in *Astounding* and *Unknown* over the next several years.

Russell Miller does not provide nearly as thorough an examination of Hubbard's SF career as it deserves. Miller has much more fun with Hubbard's Navy stint during World War II—a combination of wild ineptitude and wilder self-aggrandizing fantasy that could have fit right into one of Hubbard's off-the-wall comedy adventures for *Unknown*.

Hubbard made many claims of fierce combat and severe injuries. Miller quotes an insightful passage from Jack Williamson's autobiography, describing a 1944 dinner for fellow science fiction writers shortly before Williamson left for duty in the South Pacific: "Hubbard was just back from the Aleutians then, hinting of desperate action aboard a navy destroyer, adventures he couldn't say much about because of military security. I recall his eyes, the wary, light-blue eyes that I somehow associate with the gunmen of the old West, watching me sharply as he talked as if to see how much I believed. Not much." Just before the war ended, Hubbard met a Los Angeles physicist

Read This

Recently read and recommended by Lisa Goldstein:

The Unconquered Country, by Geoff Ryman, Bantam Spectra. Ryman combines all sorts of elements that have no business working together: a strange jarring future, the all-too-familiar atrocities of war, the myths and customs of the Far East. He manages to bring it off brilliantly, and in only 130 pages.

Dawn, by Octavia Butler, Warner Books. The first in a series. Butler's aliens are truly alien, and their way of doing things raises some very disturbing moral questions. When people ask me to recommend a good solid science fiction novel I usually mention this one and—

An Alien Light, by Nancy Kress, Arbor House. A novel about the meeting of three very different cultures and the ways people learn or don't learn to live within these differences. Both the characters and the backgrounds are carefully worked out, and nothing seems forced.

Beloved, by Toni Morrison, Knopf. A ghost story. Morrison explores the ways slavery affected black families in the North and South. *Beloved* is the protagonist's daughter, killed when she was a baby. Some mainstream reviewers thought the fantasy element ruined the book, but I don't see how she could have written it without the use of the supernatural.

The Folk of the Air, by Peter S. Beagle, Del Rey. The Society for Creative Anachronism meets some *real* magic. The writing is so good you want to stay inside the book for months.

Aegypt, by John Crowley, Bantam Spectra. A difficult book. I'm still not sure if I liked it, but I read it twice. It's filled with gorgeous touches, beautiful prose, realistic characters and contains pieces of three or four historical novels, but it doesn't go anywhere. Supposedly there are three more in the series after this one, so I'll withhold judgment—and probably read this one again when they come out.

Strange Toys, by Patricia Grevy, Bantam Spectra. Pet's family is on the run and travels aimlessly through the United States, stopping at every crackpot sideshow exhibit there is. Meanwhile Pet is learning about voodoo magic. Grevy shows us Pet as a child, an adolescent and an adult, and each section is absolutely right. It's a very funny, very true book.

Buffalo Gals and Other Animal Presences, by Ursula K. Le Guin, Capra Press. Worth it for the title story alone. Le Guin at the top of her form.

—August 12, 1988

named Jack Parsons, who was also a disciple of Aleister Crowley, the famous British magician and occultist. Upon his discharge from the Navy, Hubbard moved into Parsons' mansion and joined him in his attempts to summon forth the Anti-Christ. Parsons was greatly impressed with Hubbard's spiritual prowess, as he wrote to Crowley: "From some of his experiences I deduced that he is in direct touch with some higher intelligence, possibly his Guardian Angel. He describes his Angel as a beautiful winged woman with red hair whom he calls the Empress and who has guided him through his life and saved him many times." Parsons was not so happy about Hubbard's quick success with Parsons' beautiful blond twenty-year-old lover Sara Northrup, but he tolerated her transfer of "sexual affection" to Hubbard. Ron and Sara soon tried to make off with \$10,000 of Parsons' money plus a jointly-owned yacht, but Parsons cast a magic spell that, he felt, drove the yacht back to the coast and into custody. After making a hasty deal with Parsons to return part of his money, Ron and Sara ran off to get married. Ron neglected to inform Sara that he already had a wife and two children, who were living with his parents while they waited for him to return home from the Navy. Nor did he tell his wife of 13 years about his new bride, even when he and Sara moved into a house near his parents nine months later. By that time, though, his wife had filed for divorce on grounds of desertion. He agreed to the divorce, returned with Sara to Los Angeles, and settled down to writing science fiction.

Well, he didn't quite settle down. During this postwar period Hubbard had begun to tell friends (three are quoted here, and others have made similar reports) that the best way to make a million dollars would be to start a new religion. Though Miller doesn't identify any sources of inspiration, Hubbard may have begun to think of such a career shortly before the war, when his close friend and editor John Campbell circulated an interesting story idea to several writers. Campbell had already written a rough draft of the story under the title "All," but he was apparently too busy to revise it to his satisfaction. Robert Heinlein wrote his own version as a novel, *Sixth Column*, which Campbell published in 1941; Fritz Leiber wrote another version, published in 1943 as *Gather, Darkness!* All these works shared a basic plot device, expressed most directly by a character in Heinlein's version: "Has it ever occurred to any of you to think of the possibilities in founding a new religion?"

Hubbard did not immediately proceed to found a new religion after the war. Instead he put together a "new" psychotherapy, which he called Dianetics, and probably made his million during its first few months of official existence. John Campbell became heavily involved in promoting and practicing Dianetics, as did A. E. van Vogt and several other SF writers. Hubbard kept busy writing and lecturing about the new "science"; he bragged to his literary agent, Forrest J. Ackerman, "Well, Forry, I'm dragging down Clark Gable's salary." Van Vogt became head of the Hubbard Dianetic Research Foundation of California, where "for the first few weeks...he recalled doing little but tear open envelopes and pull out \$500 checks from people who wanted to take an auditor's course."

Less than a year after Dianetics emerged into public view, Hubbard was in bad shape. John Campbell had reluctantly severed official connections with him; Sara was suing for divorce; his original

Dianetic Research Foundation stood accused by the New Jersey Board of Medical Examiners of "teaching medicine without a license"; and the Los Angeles Foundation was near bankruptcy. Hubbard and Dianetics were temporarily rescued by a sympathetic millionaire from Wichita, Kansas, who had "turned to Dianetics in the hope of finding a cure for his chronic constipation." Hubbard briefly relocated his headquarters to Wichita (and met his third wife there), but that arrangement also disintegrated into suits and countersuits. The time had come for Hubbard to play his trump card: he announced the founding of a new religion, to be called Scientology.

The latter half of *Bare-Faced Messiah* describes the myriad ups and downs of Scientology, the growing power and ultimate personal disintegration of L. Ron Hubbard, in fascinating detail. Until the end of his life Hubbard maintained tight control of Scientological scripture, mixing elements of Dianetic Freudianism, Crowley's occultism, and science-fictional fantasizing about events from his other lives that had happened long ago in galaxies far far away. He also maintained authoritarian rule of the organization itself, with results as disastrous to his own psyche as to other individuals.

Russell Miller never attempts a clear formulation of Hubbard's psychological problems, though he quotes others as proposing diagnoses ranging from paranoia to manic-depression. There are two major problems with formulating a diagnosis at this time and distance. First, the book quotes very little of the private Hubbard, the Hubbard who describes his inner experiences without attempting some kind of public display. (Perhaps such material was omitted partly for legal reasons; perhaps little material of this kind exists, because he usually kept himself on display.) Second, Hubbard was a complex individual with many facets to his personality, and the extreme power granted to him by the Scientology faithful would have encouraged the heightened expression even of his milder personality tendencies. For instance, Hubbard displayed a good deal of narcissistic behavior, in both the popular and the clinical senses of the term. But it would be difficult, if one were being worshipped by tens or hundreds of thousands as the New Messiah and as the greatest intellect of all time, to avoid some degree of narcissistic indulgence.

Anyone who has tried to read the recent book *L. Ron Hubbard: Messiah or Madman?*, a poorly organized and unselective account of Hubbard's later career, will welcome the well-structured and generally smooth prose of *Bare-Faced Messiah*. Anyone interested in cults, or in con artists, or simply in a book that offers many opportunities to tell your friends, "Listen to this!—No, the next paragraph is even better!—Wow, this is just incredible!", should run and not walk to the nearest bookstore. *Bare-Faced Messiah* has already been subjected to unsuccessful suppression attempts in England and Canada; distribution of its second U. S. printing was stalled by a court injunction. According to Miller, Hubbard's 1982 space-opera epic *Battlefield Earth* was helped onto the best-seller list through mandatory multiple purchases by the faithful; similar rumors have circulated about the ten-volume sequel. Just as devoted Scientologists may give it, so they may take it away. So get your copy of *Bare-Faced Messiah*, if you can, before the book disappears from the shelves. ▴

Final Blackout by L. Ron Hubbard

Los Angeles: Bridge Publications, forthcoming in Spring 1989

Reviewed by David G. Hartwell

Here is the report of history, the received wisdom of the Golden Age of SF: *Final Blackout* by L. Ron Hubbard is "powerfully written, prophetically warning [sic], with the principal character magnificently drawn" and "*Final Blackout*, which began in the April 1940 *Astounding Science-Fiction*, was a stunning achievement, certainly the most powerful and readable 'warning' story that had appeared in science fiction to that date. . . . [its] real strength rests in Hubbard's characterization of the superhuman leadership qualities of The Lieutenant, making it a masterpiece in a literature where good characterization is rare. As a story, it grips the reader from the first sentence and will not release him until the author is through." So says Sam Moskowitz in two essays published in the early 1960s,

collected in *Seekers of Tomorrow*. And my recollection is that many people accepted this assessment, at least until the mid-1950s. The book has been out of print in paperback for a number of years now, and hasn't appeared on anyone's list of classics for more than three decades. It's now about to be printed in a new edition, this time from Hubbard's personal publisher, with attendant foafaraw that will influence and contour its reception. So I reread it for the first time since I was fourteen to see what is there now.

Well, it isn't a very good novel but one can see why it had an impact in 1940. John W. Campbell Jr. was reinventing SF in *Astounding* in those years and this piece, as far as one can tell borrowed and mutated from the "Boss" sections of H. G. Wells's film,

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Things to Come, with the addition of a heroic fantasy pulp hero, must have seemed delightfully scary to an audience of Americans whose country had not yet entered the World War, and just distanced enough from them to be a stimulating speculation on a dark future over there (not here). Hubbard is herein conservative, anti-communist, and a military elitist (but based upon natural virtue and experience, not rank and training). He and Robert A. Heinlein were friends. And you can read about Hubbard's rocky relationship with the real military in *Bare-Faced Messiah*. The Lieutenant is an unnamed unkillable survivor, a perfect embodiment of Campbellian social Darwinism, who gets to conquer the Commies who have taken over Britain, as well as his own bungling superiors, and set up a kind of utopia (benign dictatorship). A pulp hero.

What it does have going for it is a quite readable heroic fantasy story, with a lot of narrative drive, in which the hero conquers the world, more or less, and then dies nobly. To readers exposed only to pulp SF in 1940, this may have seem like magnificent characterization, but today the presentation of *The Lieutenant* seems like flat assertion and cliché. Standards of characterization really were lower in SF in those days and almost no one in SF read much mainstream literature for comparison, through which they would have seen that the emperor has no clothes. The Wellsian model is infinitely more interesting, with the moral coordinates reversed. (The intrepid airman in the second section of *Things To Come* is the hero, representing science and rationality, while the conquering Boss is a military barbarian. Hubbard takes that structure and ennobles the conqueror at the expense of the pseudo-Wellsian poltroons who arrive at the end from the U.S. with advanced technology and squash utopia.) Hubbard's choice results in a rather anti-science SF story. But it's a pulp serial novel, not the aesthetic unit we expect under the label "novel" today. As such, it's interesting as an example of how a writer could simplify and debase serious speculation to make a conventional story fit Campbellian prejudices. It belongs to literary history, not to literature today. ▴

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a column
Daniel M. Pinkwater...speaks

My Uncle Melvin comes to my house every day. At night he goes back to the Looney Bin. He calls it the Looney Bin. It's a special place for crazy people. Uncle Melvin lives there because he's crazy. My parents leave for work early in the morning. Uncle Melvin makes my breakfast and walks me to school. Then he goes home and takes care of the house. He cleans up, and does a lot of stuff in the garden. When school is over, Uncle Melvin is waiting for me. He walks me home and stays until my parents get back, and it's time for him to go to the Looney Bin.

"Hello, Melvin. Hello, Charles," my mother says. "Did you have a good day?"

"The dog is mad at me," Uncle Melvin might say. "She isn't speaking to me—but she'll get over it."

Sometimes Melvin does strange things because he's crazy. For example, one morning he made me a fried egg sandwich for breakfast. This sandwich had a slice of toast between two fried eggs.

Another time he mowed the lawn, but he left a big "X" unmowed in the middle. Then he collected a lot of stones and painted them white. He arranged the stones to spell out: FLYING SAUCERS! LAND HERE! PLEASE! I AM YOUR FRIEND.

Uncle Melvin talks to himself. He also talks to me. He talks to me when we are walking to school, and when we walk back. He tells me about his theories. One of his theories is the President of the United States is an iguana—that's a big lizard. He says the President wears a President mask and a President suit, but underneath he's an iguana.

Uncle Melvin says he can talk to birds and animals. He says they can talk to him, and he understands what they are saying.

"See that young cat?" Melvin asks me. "He's the playboy of the western world. He doesn't know there's anything he can't defeat. He's handsome, strong, and stupid as the sky is blue. He won't listen to me."

The birds really do seem to listen to Melvin. Whenever he goes outside, the birds all start to whistle and chirp, and Uncle Melvin whistles back to them.

I asked my father, "Can Uncle Melvin really understand what the birds are saying?"

"Maybe he can," my father said. "When we were boys wild birds would perch on his fingers."

"Maybe sometime I'll teach you to talk to the birds," Uncle

Melvin says.

Uncle Melvin got an old-fashioned hat. It's a derby—one of those round hats. He wears it all the time. It looks strange with his blue jeans and green suspenders.

"This hat gives me power," he says. "The round shape of the inside of the hat causes my thoughts to bounce back into my brain. That way they can't get away until I'm finished with them."

Uncle Melvin told me he was noticing something strange.

"What I'm noticing," he said, "is that I seem to be able to control when it rains and when it stops."

"You can control when it rains and when it stops?"

"No matter how hard it's raining," Uncle Melvin said, "when I go outside, it stops. Then I noticed that if I turn to the left—fast, it starts raining again. If I turn to the right—I get a rainbow."

"Really?"

"Really."

I talked to my father. "Uncle Melvin says he can cause it to rain and to stop raining. Is that possible?"

"No," my father said. "It is not possible."

"He says he can make a rainbow."

"Uncle Melvin is a special person," my father said. "He sees the world in his own way. But he cannot make it rain or make it stop raining, or cause a rainbow."

"You said he could understand the birds."

"I said maybe," my father said. "I said maybe he could understand the birds—in his own way. I do not believe he can talk with them the way you and I are talking now."

"Oh."

"I don't want you to argue with Melvin—and I know you won't make fun of him."

"You mean because he's crazy?"

"Charles, I have never thought of Melvin as crazy. In many ways he is the least crazy person I know. He has his ideas—that's all."

"My father doesn't believe you can do that stuff with the rain," I said to Uncle Melvin.

"That's okay," Melvin said. "I wouldn't believe it myself."

On Saturdays and Sundays, Melvin spends the whole day in the garden—unless it is covered with snow—then he usually hangs out in the basement, fixing things.

One particular Saturday morning—it was raining on and off. I was in my room, putting together a model race car and listening to the radio. I happened to look out the window. Uncle Melvin was digging in the garden. There were a few birds hopping around by his feet, as usual. He was wearing his derby hat. In the sky there were four rainbows.



*MacPaint artist and distinguished weirdo Daniel M. Pinkwater lives somewhere north of New York City, where he writes essential books like **Lizard Music** and **The Hoboken Chicken Emergency**.*

Screed

(letters of comment)

Gene Wolfe, Barrington, Illinois:

Kathryn Cramer's piece was marvelous! I wish I'd had it when I was trying to convince some philosophy student, by a succession of increasingly exasperated letters, that it's absurd to accept the validity of reason because it is reasonable—like accepting astrology because it's written in the stars. Ah, well. But I never read anything quite like that before, and I hadn't heard the joke about the spherical cow. Shouldn't her name be Rotunda?

Patrick Nielsen Hayden's much too severe on George Turner when he writes, "... education! By god, why didn't we think of that before?" What Turner suggests is not that the Swill be educated but that they be educators; and no, we *didn't* think of that. Nor have we really tried to educate them. We have tried to send them to school, a very different and less dangerous thing.

Sam Moskowitz, Newark, New Jersey:

It was pleasant to have Kathryn Cramer defend the element of science in science fiction, either real or implied. So many critics within the science fiction field often complain that the science gets in the way of the art. Getting the science into science fiction is the art. Hugo Gernsback realized that back in the late twenties and sent out 1,000-word letters to the authors telling them he didn't want scientific lectures and he didn't want the story slowed down by gobs of science, that the story came first and writers who had any skill should learn the blend or *flavor* the story with science. If that doesn't sound like established wisdom about Gernsback it's because people who credit him with being the advocate of science-laden stories are ignorant, have never read his magazine and literally are not qualified to write their reviews. Don't believe what I'm saying? I'll send you photocopies of Gernsback-signed letters to his authors validating the foregoing statements, dated 1929 and 1930! In fact, I've included a number of the letters in a 20,000-word piece scheduled for *Extrapolation* titled "Henrik Dahl Juve and the Second Gernsback Dynasty."

If, as I surmise, you are going to specialize in the long review, I suggest you round up all the back issues of *Fantasy Commentator* (48 Highland Circle, Bronxville, NY 10708-5909, \$3) you can get and read the reviews. They, for some years now, have run the best long reviews of fantasy and sf in the country, possibly on the planet, and they should be one of your models.

I really don't know which of you to address this to, since there is no designated "editor." Apparently you rule by committee and that is very difficult for any magazine. [We bring from our days as the *Little Magazine* editorial board a fair bit of practice at working cooperatively, though that doesn't rule out the future appointment of an overall editor, or even the eventual rotation of such a position among us. These first few issues are our shakedown cruise. Watch our colophon for further developments. —PNH]

John Foyster, Norwood, Australia:

[In his review of George Turner's *Drowning Towers*,] Patrick writes that arch fifties nicety which forbade identification of even vaguely-competing publications, but I did manage to work out that he was writing about the symposium on George's book in the May 1988 *Australian Science Fiction Review*. It's plain that I don't read the book as Patrick and several of the contributors to *ASFR* seem to do. I can live with this because I stick with my view that all of George's books reflect and rework his army experiences, though in different ways. This may be old-fashioned, but I don't demand that George think the way I do.

I'm less comfortable with the broad reaction to the fact that the torture of Sykes was fruitless. I admit that in dealing with science fiction one has to acknowledge sf's origins in teenage wish fulfillment, but readers should not be compelled utterly to live forever in a universe in which the protagonist's actions lead inevitably to (his)

desired consequences—no matter how much skiffy readers might want this. Especially not when the motif of the novel is the exploration of a violent world by inhabitants of "peaceful" ones—ours and that of Lenna and her friends. [The failure to credit *ASFR* was inadvertent, not a nicety; we don't view the review-magazine scene as a Darwinian competition, red in tooth and claw. In fact we admire *Australian Science Fiction Review* and urge that our readers check it out: for six issues sent air mail, US\$12 made out to Ebony Books, GPO Box 1294L, Melbourne, Victoria 3001, Australia. The point about Sykes's torture was that Turner's literary affect, and the framing device (in which the central tale is a novel being written in the far future), lead me to expect not necessarily that Right Should Triumph but that consequences—any consequences—should be detailed more coherently. Instead, at the end of the central tale it's as if the business with Sykes never happened at all. —PNH]

Michael Dirda, editor, the Washington Post Book World:

I was delighted to see the sample issue of *The New York Review of Science Fiction*, though I think you might have chosen a more imaginative name for the magazine. Naturally, the first thing I did was look at your statement of purpose where I was chagrined to read the following:

"Nowadays a competent piece of hackwork can be praised at the expense of an ambitious, if not wholly successful, novel by a significantly talented unknown (vid. the *Washington Post Book World* review of Paul Park and Jack Chalker last year). Well, to echo the old Galaxy line from the 50s, you won't find it in the *New York Review of SF*."

I think this is a cheap shot. The reviewer in question was Orson Scott Card, not precisely a writer ignorant of the field. He criticized Park's novel legitimately, pointing out that for all its ambition its alien characters were so alien that they were hard to care about. Jack Chalker, virtually a local figure for the *Post* (he lives in Baltimore), is a popular and successful writer whose books we almost never review. I was pleased that a reviewer chose to praise him, at least once, for what he does well: write craftsmanlike entertainments that sf fans enjoy. . . .

An sf column with a revolving authorship and tight deadlines is bound to come up with an occasional dud. But on the whole, the main critique I hear of *Book World*'s sf coverage is that it is too literary, too sophisticated. Still, that's all right with me. I want sf to be examined with all the close attention and critical equipment brought to bear on any other kind of serious fiction. It is no accident that Gene Wolfe's novels are reviewed on the front page of the *Washington Post Book World*. That's where they deserve to be. [No slight to the *Book World* was intended. We cited the publication rather than the reviewer merely in order to avoid dumping on Orson Scott Card, whom we figure has been attacked enough for the time being. —DGH] [In regard to our name, it's true that we could have chosen something a lot snappier and more scientific, say for instance *Thrusting Starships* or *Mondo Digital Undertow*, but faced with such a wealth of choices the descriptive alternative seemed best. All of the staff live and work in or around New York and its sf publishing scene, which is all that the title is meant to convey. To those (not Michael Dirda) who read arrogance into anything with "New York" in its title, we can only say that our intention was truth-in-labeling. New York is as provincial a place as any other. See the back page of this issue for further thoughts on bias. —PNH]

Letters of comment are welcome. All correspondence commenting on editorial content will be considered for publication unless the writer requests otherwise. Due to space considerations, published letters are subject to editing. ▶

JANE YOLEN

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—*The Washington Post Book World*

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ON MY TIME

We are biased. Just wanted to let you know. Most of the knowledgeable people in the SF field who aren't professionals have strong allegiances to a political position or a literary stance or, at very least, have strongly developed tastes based upon wide reading. Often the most biased commentaries are the most provocative and interesting and in the long run useful to thoughtful readers. If the feminist SF critics didn't prove this to your satisfaction a decade ago, perhaps the example of the *Cheap Truth* critics from recent years will suffice. One must be sensitive to the bias of a critic or reviewer in order to savor the finest pleasures of that person's work and at the same time correct for distortions. Reading, itself, it seems to me, is a rich and complexly biased activity (when done well) for every individual.

But what about conflict of interest? Well, it seems to us a long-standing tradition in the SF field that professionals and fans wear different hats at different moments and that truly one's primary allegiance ought to be to SF. Lester Del Rey was for years the *Analog* reviewer while married to a major editor and is indeed a powerful force at Ballantine/Del Rey. Yet I believe that he reviewed every book sincerely and honestly, according to his taste and experience. I defend his bias while in fact sometimes disagreeing with his taste a whole lot. And in the following years, because it has seemed appropriate to ignore conflict of interest in favor of experience and taste, Algis Budrys and Baird Searles (consultants to Writers of the Future and Warner Books respectively) have continued to hold responsible reviewing positions, even to the extreme of Budrys reviewing his own anthology favorably. Certainly he is sincere, although as Damon Knight once remarked it is hard to distinguish such a practice from the judge of a contest awarding himself the prize (see also Gilbert and Sullivan's *Trial by Jury*). Where do we stand, then? Well, I gave up my review column in *Crawdaddy* in the mid-seventies when I became an editor in charge of an SF line (I had been a junior-level consultant before that). For this magazine, I will write occasional essays and review occasional reprints. We will try to avoid conflicts but we are all inextricably woven into professional as well as fan circles personally and we think this makes us more, not less careful. We stand for experience, passion, for improving the breed—bias, if you will. That's how we see it.

The entanglements of the editors and staff of this magazine are industry-wide, and we do not agree point by point on SF, not by a long shot—although our shared agenda includes the premise that SF ought to be looked at seriously and read consciously, not passively. Furthermore, we are inviting editors and writers and fans to write for us from other perspectives. To the extent that we can obtain the material, we will review some books more than once, we will review every book of high quality for which we can get an enthusiastic reviewer, and we will publish (edited) letters in response to what we publish. We will particularly try to review older books newly reprinted. Our staff includes writers, an agent, fans, editors, four occasional Hugo nominees, two World Fantasy Award nominees—not one person who does not have some known professional connection to SF publishing in the U.S. Each of us has a conflict or two that we will, as a group, try to cancel out in the magazine. The result, we believe, will be indistinguishable from the sum of our cantankerous and biased personal tastes—which is what we think of as one of the attractions of the *NYRSF*.

And, by the way, we can always use another good reviewer. We pay a token fee of ten dollars. Drop us a line.

—David G. Hartwell & the Editors.

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